



Hansen Highland

*Crossing
the
Threshold*

*Based on a True Story
A Healer Revealed*

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Dedication

To my husband, John. Thank you for your support, love and friendship every day.

My Beloveds. Danielle, Dustin and Holly. For teaching me the meaning of unconditional love. Life is so sweet and rich because of you.

And Debra. Thank you for being such a wonderful teacher and friend throughout many lifetimes.

Finally, this work is dedicated to those walking their truth on the spiritual path.

Let your light shine amongst the dark!

Acknowledgement

The Author *highly* recommends that a beginner/novice learning about The Healing Arts, should *not* attempt any forms of energy healing, clearing or connecting with the Angels mentioned in this book, without the guidance of an experienced individual.

Prologue

Elizabeth Warren stood upon the edge of the bluff, looking out toward the sea. It was an unusually beautiful day, and not a soul was around. The scent of the sea revived her. It always did. Here, she felt safe and at peace.

After three deep breaths, she began. “Father, please fill me with your white light of protection, your positive healing energy—in me and around me. Surround me with your holy light above me, below me, to the north, south, east, and west of me. Seal me with your holy light.”

Such a small prayer but very powerful to those who depended upon it as their shield.

As she pondered these words of protection, Elizabeth thought of the very first time she had heard the prayer. It had seemed like such a small thing then—a long time ago. Yet she had always believed in the strength of prayer, even as a child. Now, she knew the truth. She knew that if she did not recite certain prayers before she began her work, she could open a vortex, one that could bring forth deep and powerful evil.

It had been many years since she had experienced that one episode; it had been in the very beginning of her mentorship with Emily. She thought about how horribly

frightening that had been. If she hadn't experienced it herself, she would have never believed it possible.

Clearly, it had been a turning point—one that had changed her life forever.

Chapter 1

October 2001

Today was Elizabeth's birthday; she was turning thirty-nine. That morning, she gave herself a glance in the mirror. *Not too bad. Not great either.* She was five feet six and had shoulder-length light-brown hair, hazel eyes, long legs, and the one thing she had always been grateful for: her youthful-looking skin. Not a wrinkle was to be found. Her mother had taught her long ago to take care of her skin. "You'll be carrying that face around everywhere you go," her mother had always stressed.

Finishing the last of her makeup, she checked the clock again and realized she'd be late for her birthday massage. She grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

Amanda, her massage therapist, had moved again—this time to Half Moon Bay—to join a new business. Even though this was twenty minutes farther away, Amanda was good at what she did, so Elizabeth followed. The shop was called Blessings. It was a holistic healing center—a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house that had been

converted to a business, complete with two massage therapists, one chiropractor, one marriage counselor, and a medium. There were home items for purchase as well—statues, altar cloths, incense, essential oils, dream catchers, crystals, and books and prints of all the favorite shamans, gurus, and saints. The place had a veritable plethora of healing, as any well-stocked holistic center should. Plus it was located in the main part of town, so it was easy to get to and was right near the beach.

Always up for a new experience, Elizabeth drove the extra twenty minutes. She located Blessings and parked in the back, just in case someone should recognize her car. She was going there to see Amanda for a massage, not for all that other weird stuff. *I am a Catholic after all*, she thought.

When she opened the door to the shop, Elizabeth immediately felt at home. It felt peaceful here. That was a nice surprise. She had been expecting maybe a sense of uneasy weirdness with all the witchy paraphernalia.

Amanda came to greet her right by the front desk. “Hey, Elizabeth, you made it! It’s good to see you. Hope the traffic wasn’t too bad. It can get tricky around here.” Amanda gave Elizabeth a hug, patting her on the back.

“Wow, Amanda, this is crazy! I’ve never been to a holistic place before. Look at all this stuff! Do you have books for casting spells? I’d like to get rid of that crazy redhead neighbor across the street.”

Amanda laughed. She had heard about “the Red Cow” and the woman’s obsession of watching Elizabeth and her family. It was creepy.

“Well, I can introduce you to the owner, Carla. She knows her stock pretty well.” Amanda turned to the woman sitting behind the front desk. “Carla, I’d like to introduce Elizabeth. She’s one of my oldest and favorite clients. Elizabeth, this is Carla.”

Carla and Elizabeth said “hi” in unison. Carla then extended her hand across the front desk and said, “Welcome. It’s nice to meet you. If there’s anything I can help you with, just let me know. We actually do carry a couple of books on spells. We only support the white craft, though, for healing and such. Nothing for the dark. Not ever.”

Elizabeth replied, “Oh, I was teasing. I just came for a massage.”

Carla gave her a once-over and then just smiled.

After Elizabeth settled in, she and Amanda caught up on the latest gossip about the people at the spa where Amanda used to work. They talked about Elizabeth’s family, her husband and her kids. The conversation came full circle to Blessings.

“So what’s it like working here?” Elizabeth asked. “Is it a huge difference from the spa?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Amanda replied. “The clients are a little more laidback. It’s a beach town, so the atmosphere is sort of like Santa Cruz. I really like the people here, especially the medium, Emily. Elizabeth, she’s amazing! You have to meet her. I think she’s here today.”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe.”

After the massage, Elizabeth went to check out some of the books on display and maybe find something to

ward off creepy, nosy neighbors. Carla was still behind the desk, looking over the latest *Psychology Today* issue, when Elizabeth entered the front room. She smiled and went back to reading. *Ah, she must be the marriage counselor*, Elizabeth thought. *Hmmm*. She meandered through books on saints and gurus and then moved on to the essential oils and various sprays for protection, chakra clearing, and even attuning with the angels. She picked up a bottle with a dropper and thought, *Not sure what you'd do with that*.

"Elizabeth, there you are. See anything you'd like?" Amanda stood beside a very pretty blonde with bright-green eyes. "This is Emily, the medium I was telling you about."

Emily was a straightforward, no-nonsense woman who stood about five feet eight inches tall. Her sweet, angelic face and the twinkle in her eyes made people feel comfortable around her. Even as she told people about their dead relatives, friends, or pets, still no one was truly afraid. Not really.

"Hi, I'm Emily Gordon. So you're a friend of Amanda's?"

"Yes, we're friends. I've been a client of hers for six years or so. She's a great massage therapist!"

Amanda smiled. "You're too sweet, Liz. Thank you. Look, girls, I gotta go. I'd love to stay and chat, but I have another client coming in a few minutes. I'll see you in a couple of weeks, Liz."

Emily waved good-bye as Amanda headed back to her massage studio.

Emily smiled and turned back to Elizabeth. "She is great! She's done wonders on my lower back. I work

full-time as a nurse and part-time as a medium. So I'm on my feet all day, and my back is throbbing sometimes."

They chatted for a little longer about Amanda and Blessings.

"I hope sometime you can come in for a reading," Emily said as they were about to part. "You might really enjoy it. It was a pleasure to meet you!"

"And you as well," Elizabeth said. "I just might take you up on the reading."

They shook hands and said good-bye.

And so it began. Elizabeth purchased the lavender essential oil, bought a small print with a picture of Jesus on it, and booked a reading with Emily. It all happened so fast that, as she drove home, she decided maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. She had never been a staunch Catholic exactly, but her family went to church. Heck, Elizabeth went to eight-thirty morning mass at St. Matthew's two, three times week. She was one of the youngest regulars there. *Oh, for heaven's sake, this isn't a big deal. Get a hold of yourself, woman! One reading, ask her some questions about a couple of long-passed relatives, and I'll be on my way. Unbeknownst to Jack, of course.* Her husband was such a freak about the paranormal. He couldn't even watch scary movies. He watched plenty of pornos, though. But then, so did Elizabeth. She couldn't throw stones there.

As Elizabeth pulled into her driveway, she decided she was looking forward to meeting with Emily. She planned to ask about her father. Over the years, she had tried

to forgive her father for not being around most of her childhood. She had barely seen him, especially after he and her mother had divorced. As a sea captain, his job had taken him all over the world. Elizabeth had grappled with abandonment issues for years.

Then there was her brother Harry, who had passed a long time ago. Such a sad story. Maybe that should be better left alone.

Elizabeth made a quick stop at the grocery store and then headed home. The garage door opened, and she drove her car inside. She had only an hour before it was time to pick up the kids. She put the groceries away as quickly as possible. Then she ran down three flights of stairs to put yet another load of laundry in. She was amazed at how stinky her son could get his gym shorts. “Good God, what the hell does he do to these things?” she asked herself aloud. *Never mind*, she then thought. He was a teenager, and she really didn’t want to know. More detergent for this load.

The next forty minutes were filled with returning phone calls, checking e-mails, and picking up her three children’s crap left around the house. Then she made a mental note about working a hot-lunch shift at the middle school the next day because one of the other moms had a dentist appointment.

Finally, Elizabeth made her way out the front door and jumped in the Suburban, a.k.a. “the Beast.” The nine-passenger SUV was almost always filled to capacity, holding her kids and almost everyone else’s in Burlingame. Elizabeth didn’t mind, though. She really did like the kids

and enjoyed helping out with the pickups and drop-offs. Just part of the unglorified mom job.

First stop, the elementary school to pick up her youngest, Molly. At eight years old, Molly was starting to become a real beauty. She had long brown hair that was always flying behind her at some soccer or softball game and huge brown eyes that were forever taking in what her older brother and sister were doing. Those brown eyes held a deep connection to animals, and Elizabeth would bet big money they held a connection to angels too.

Then on to the middle school for Justin, the sweetest thirteen-year-old you'd ever meet. Tall and shy, he was the best negotiator in the family, "the Lawyer." He could argue valid reasons why he should get that five-dollar allowance raise, and, his gray eyes full of mirth, he usually got it. He was charm personified and well on his way to becoming a wonderful young man.

Last stop was the high school. This was always a challenge. Elizabeth had to navigate the parking lot and students talking on their cell phones trying to look cool and impressive. Then there were the students with driver's licenses who drove like bats out of hell trying to get out of the parking lot. Lately, it had gotten to be so stressful that Elizabeth had asked her eldest daughter, Charlotte, to walk down the street a bit to be picked up at the corner. Charlotte was pretty good about that. She never complained about much. Being the oldest at sixteen, she was responsible, beautiful, and a great student. Usually, Charlotte drove, trying to get practice in for her driver's

license. Today Elizabeth felt the traffic was too much for a student driver, though.

“Mom, why can’t I drive back home? I need the practice!” Charlotte said, her big blue eyes flashing. Her friends were nearby, and she probably wanted to show them she was driving.

“Look, Char, let’s just get home in one piece right now. I can’t believe they give licenses to some of these kids! Is that Andrew from up the street? Oh my God, he’s driving his mom’s Mercedes?” Elizabeth shook her head. Charlotte waved.

The Warren home was poetry in motion. It was life. The home bulged with five people, three cats, a dog named Lucy, and a goldfish named Fred. Fred lived in the fountain near the front door. Marie, another goldfish, had lived there with him, but one day she’d just jumped out. She must have had enough of Fred.

Elizabeth and Jack had spent many years remodeling this house to make it their refuge from the real world, a place to raise their family. It was a beautiful Mediterranean house with five bedrooms, four bathrooms, a gorgeous granite and stainless steel kitchen, and a wine cellar. It was a dream home that they had built together. It had been a happy home for many years ... until things had begun to change. After seventeen years of marriage, the foundation had shifted.

At last, the week had sped by, and Elizabeth was heading over to the coast for her reading with Emily. As she wound her way along Highway 92, she enjoyed the farmlands full

of flowers, vegetables, and Half Moon Bay's specialty—pumpkins. Every year, there was a huge pumpkin weigh-off. People from all over the Bay Area came to compete. It was quite an honor to win not only the prize money but also the recognition in the agriculture community for having the heaviest pumpkin of all. Some pumpkins were as large as 1,600 pounds! Thank God the contest was a few weeks away, as 92 would be jam-packed with cars then, all jockeying to stop off at one of the many pumpkin patches to pick the most perfect pumpkin. Some farms had pony rides; others had hayrides. And this year someone had come up with the idea of an elephant ride! Real elephants in Half Moon Bay? Who would have ever thought of that? Boy, times had changed since Elizabeth's kids were little. In preschool each of her kids had gone on a class field trip to a pumpkin patch where the highlights had been having a picnic lunch and picking out a pumpkin.

Elizabeth always looked forward to this drive. Not only was the drive beautiful, but this highway led directly to the many beaches on Highway One and the Pacific Ocean. Oftentimes, when she had been young, her family had gone to Saint Francis Beach for days of sun, white sand, and picnics. Her mom had always made the best turkey sandwiches. Her mouth watered just thinking of that first bite, the turkey so moist and the rolls so fresh, but why had there always been sand in them? That crunch, crunch sound had always given her goose bumps, but she'd eaten the sandwiches anyway. She remembered she would add Doritos to hers; then she didn't notice the sand so much.

Elizabeth's attention pulled back to the present. She was both excited and nervous for this reading. What if Emily told her things she really didn't want to know? Was Emily really able to speak with the dead? What if this was just a waste of seventy dollars? *Well, I'll soon find out*, she thought as she drove to the back parking lot of Blessings.

Emily was waiting near the front desk when Elizabeth entered the shop. Carla, the owner/marriage counselor, was again sitting behind the desk. This time she was on the phone. She waved to Elizabeth.

Emily walked over and greeted Elizabeth. "Hi, Elizabeth, welcome back! It's nice to see you again." Emily opened hers arms for a hug.

Awkwardly, Elizabeth hugged her back. "Hey, Emily, nice to see you."

"Let's head back to my office, and we'll get started." Emily led the way down a small corridor that had three rooms. It was quiet, except for the clicking of Elizabeth's high-heeled shoes on the hardwood floor. Elizabeth again noticed a feeling of peace as she followed the medium. This calmed her anxiety.

As Emily opened the door to her office, Elizabeth looked in and smiled. *No shrunken heads or voodoo dolls with pins sticking out of them. That's good*, Elizabeth thought. *But where is the crystal ball?* There was nothing strange here. The office was not very large. Two white wicker chairs faced each other, and a small circular white wicker table sat between the chairs with a box of Kleenex on it. There were a couple of watercolors of ... were those

dolphins? One very large Boston fern sat in the corner by the window. Wait a minute! There was a massage table over against the wall that had a bedspread of some sort and a small flowered covered pillow on top of it. What was that for? Emily motioned for Elizabeth to sit in one of the two chairs.

“So have you been to a medium before?” Emily asked with kind eyes and a warm smile.

“Well, not really. I mean, actually once, but it wasn’t a very good experience. My girlfriends and I were out celebrating my birthday, and, um, we’d all had quite a few glasses of wine. One thing led to another, and on a dare we went to this psychic nearby.” Warmth rose up in Elizabeth’s body, turning her face red. It was a trait she hated because it always made it obvious when she was embarrassed. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. *I’m not going to reveal much more to this lady*, Elizabeth thought. *Let’s see what she can tell me.*

The afternoon light was coming through the blinds; it made long, faint bars on the hardwood floor. As Elizabeth looked at the floor, Emily said, “It’s been my experience that with some readings clients hear what they’re meant to hear, not what they were hoping for.”

Emily continued, “So I probably should tell you a little bit about myself. Since I was young, I’ve always seemed to know things. At first I didn’t realize that it was my intuition, but as I grew older, I started to understand. I am guided by the messages that come to me from angels and guides and also, of course, the dead. These messages can come through as voices or visions, and sometimes

it's just plain old intuition, where I just know and feel an angel's presence."

Elizabeth sat enraptured, yet she had a healthy dose of skepticism. After all, she had attended Catholic schools all her life, and just five years ago she'd graduated from a private Catholic college. Her religion usually discounted people like this. *I wonder what Sister Pat would say if she could see me now*, Elizabeth thought with a smile.

Being curious, Elizabeth asked, "Do you consider yourself a Christian?"

"Absolutely!" Emily replied.

Elizabeth nodded. She was relieved to hear it. Then she asked, "Isn't that a lot of information to take in at once? Does it ever get confusing?"

"No, not really. The angels and the dead are pretty clear about what they want to communicate." Emily laughed easily. "Plus, I'm always very careful as to whom I listen to; I always check my sources before I continue with a message. Mediums have to be careful that they're not connected to a dark source. Dark beings try to fool you. When you work in the spiritual realm, you have to protect yourself from evil. It's kind of like an occupational hazard." Emily said this last bit very sweetly.

Good Lord! Keep them away from me, Elizabeth thought.

"So let's get started. We have an hour session today." Emily moved on. "So I like to begin with a prayer. It's part acknowledgement to the angels and part protection. Okay?"

Elizabeth nodded and buckled her spiritual seatbelt. *Here we go.*

“Father, please fill Elizabeth and me with your white light of protection, your positive healing energy ...” Emily continued on with her prayer. Elizabeth was startled when Emily stopped her chant and asked, “Do I have your permission to talk to your angels, Elizabeth?”

“Ah, yeah, sure ... okay,” Elizabeth said while thinking, *What?*

“Good, you both said yes; I was talking to your spirit as well,” Emily said. “In order for me to provide you with messages, I need your permission. It basically has to do with free will. Don’t worry about it.”

The small room seemed a bit smaller to Elizabeth but not in a threatening way, more like the feeling of being snugly wrapped in a warm and cozy blanket.

“Angel, who do you serve?” Emily asked with her eyes closed and head tilted up slightly as though she were speaking to someone just above her.

After a moment Emily said, “My angels tell me that you’re quite the skeptic and that you have come out of curiosity. They also say that you are very spiritual and have a deep connection to Jesus. Are you Catholic?”

“Yes, I am,” Elizabeth replied.

“I see that you have gone to Catholic schools too?”

Elizabeth didn’t speak but nodded.

“You’re wearing a blue-and-gray checkered skirt and a white blouse.”

Holy shit! Elizabeth thought.

Emily continued, “I gather that you like to pray a lot? I can see you at the foot of a large statue of Jesus. You seem to find a lot of solace in prayer. That’s good because

God and the angels hear all your prayers, especially the ones about your husband.”

Now Elizabeth was feeling freaked out in an exhilarating kind of way, but she still figured these were just generalizations that Emily was making.

“Your husband, he works with his hands? I can see him creating something, working with his hands. What does he do?”

“He’s a contractor,” she answered.

Jack had begun his apprenticeship in construction when he was eighteen years old. *That is pretty good*, Elizabeth thought. *But how do I know Amanda didn’t tell Emily these basic things about my family?*

The reading went on, with Emily and Elizabeth discussing prayer, the gratification of having a family, and one last item that took Elizabeth’s breath away.

“One last thing before our time runs out ...” Emily said. “You have a spirit around you that is trying to communicate with you. He says he’s your half brother. He says that he is sorry for all the pain he has caused your family. He’s with his dad and says he’s okay.”

The room seemed very still to Elizabeth. She felt that if she took just one breath, she would begin to tell this stranger all that had befallen her family surrounding her brother’s passing. *No*, Elizabeth thought, *I will not go there. He’s gone, and nothing can bring him back, not even a woman that speaks to the dead. Besides, in our family, it is verboten to speak of him.*

Emily stood up to signal that the hour was over. Elizabeth said that it had been quite an unusual experience

and that she might come back again. “I’ll call you,” she said.

“I hope you do. I think there is a lot of information that I can give you. Here’s my card,” Emily said, handing over her card. “Call me for another appointment.” Emily again offered up a hug, which Elizabeth returned more warmly.

Once in the car, Elizabeth allowed herself a moment to process what had just happened. *Wow, that reading was amazing!* Elizabeth turned the ignition on and bolted out of the parking lot knowing she was going to be late picking up the kids. Her foot hit the accelerator a little harder as she deliberated whether she would return to Half Moon Bay and Emily the medium. Something stirred within Elizabeth. Was it intuition of her own? *Yes, I’ll go back.*

Later that night Elizabeth and Jack were sitting on the couch watching the news and enjoying a glass of wine. The same dreadful stories about war, murder, and local burglaries were unfolding on the TV screen. “Jeez, don’t they ever report any nice stories? It’s such a downer to watch the news!” Elizabeth remarked.

“You have to keep up with what’s going on, though—you know, current events. Say you were at a party and people were talking about something and you had no clue what was going on,” Jack replied.

“Yeah, I guess.” Elizabeth looked over at Jack. He looked tired tonight. He worked too much, always running from one job site to another. He was still in pretty

good shape after all these years. That was one thing that Elizabeth always enjoyed about a guy who worked in construction—every day was a workout, no gym membership required! She smiled. *There's something hot about construction guys. Just so fucking hot.*

"Hey, did I tell you I went to Half Moon Bay today?" she asked.

Jack shook his head.

"Yeah, Amanda has left the spa and set up shop in a little studio near Main Street." That wasn't entirely true, but there were aspects of truth to it. Amanda *was* working there, even if that wasn't why Elizabeth had gone. *God, I am certainly my mother's daughter. She's the expert at stretching the truth, a real spin doctor.*

Jack took a sip of wine and continued to watch TV. "Oh, nice. How was the traffic? I heard there was an accident there the other day; 92 was backed up for hours on both sides. A fatality I think."

"Not too bad, just people poking down the road looking at pumpkin stuff and all the crap they've got going on." *Better change the subject*, Elizabeth thought. *I made the comment I wanted to. Let's just leave it at that.*

Elizabeth got up and headed to the kitchen. Her heart sank when she saw all the goddamn dishes she was going to have to do. *Why doesn't anyone ever help me? I made a nice dinner, and I have to clean up too?* She grumbled under her breath as she loaded one dishwasher and began to fill the second. Then she poured herself another glass of wine. "I'm heading downstairs, hon," she called to Jack. "I'm tired."

“What? No kiss?” Jack smiled as he said this. It was a nightly request.

Elizabeth walked over to the couch and leaned over to kiss her husband. His kisses were always nice. She still liked the feel of him next to her in bed too, his rough hands gliding over her legs and ass. They’d had fun in that department. She just hoped he wasn’t sharing his lips or hands with anyone else. Elizabeth sometimes had that fear about Jack. Lately, she’d been feeling it more often. *Maybe I’m just being paranoid*, she thought. *Maybe he’s just been overworked with that idiot partner of his and 132 employees. Maybe.*

As she headed downstairs, carefully carrying her glass of wine down the three flights of stairs, she began to reminisce about her reading with Emily. A little jolt of excitement ran through her blood. She just couldn’t believe how accurate Emily had been. The first few items about Elizabeth being religious and attending catholic schools could have been generalizations, Elizabeth knew. Even the remark about her husband could have been information Emily had heard from Amanda. But the bit about her brother Harry, no one knew about. Elizabeth never talked about him, not to anyone. That was unnerving. Harry’s death was taboo. His suicide had unraveled everyone in her family.

Emily having hit on that was shocking. *What did she say about him being around me in spirit?* Elizabeth wondered. She remembered reading about uneasy spirits. Either they had died so fast they didn’t realize they were dead and hung out to haunt the living, or they were afraid to

cross over to the other side because they were ashamed to see God or something. Poor Harry. Maybe the latter was what had happened to him?

As Elizabeth began to doze off, her final thought was on Emily and making an appointment soon.

Chapter 2

One month later, Elizabeth was once again sitting across from Emily in the white wicker chair, trying not to show her amazement at the medium's accuracy. *How can she know these things?* Elizabeth wondered. *I can hear her talking to someone or something, but how can this be?*

"Your father is passed, right?" Emily asked.

Elizabeth nodded.

"The angels say that he was very sick for a long time before he passed. It was some sort of cancer he took treatments for."

Elizabeth's adrenaline revved up. It was true. Cancer had spread through his lymph nodes, and he'd died of NonHodgkin's disease at sixty-nine.

Emily next asked, "Did he have a drinking problem? The angels are showing me a bottle of alcohol—I think it's bourbon—over his head. Wait, no, it's scotch."

Elizabeth remembered dumping many bottles of Chivas Regal scotch whisky down the drain when she'd emptied her dad's house after he'd died.

"Emily, I have to admit I'm shocked. Really, how are you able to know these things? At first, I thought maybe

you and Amanda had spoken; she knows a lot about me. But this information you're giving me is incredible. I'm a pretty private person, and I don't discuss this stuff with anyone, except for my husband."

"I know. Believe me, it wasn't easy when I hung up my shingle and told the world I was a medium, but I do it because I can help people with messages and healing. Clients are reassured to know that their loved ones are okay. Those who've passed are in a realm far better than we are here on earth school." Emily smiled. "I've had a lot of tragedy in my life, kind of like you. When I turned sixteen, something shifted in me. It wasn't only intuition; I could hear voices and see visions through my third eye. I could hear complete conversations going on at my next-door neighbors'. I would get into my car, and the horn would go off and the windshield wipers would turn on. I wouldn't even have the key in the ignition!" Her eyes sparkled as she laughed at her past. "I went to psychiatrists, psychologists, you name it. I was even tested for schizophrenia. I passed everything with flying colors. No one could truly diagnose me, which was a huge relief. I thought maybe I would lose my RN license. I still work as a surgical nurse. Many doctors I've worked with for years believe in my abilities as a medium. Same goes with other nurses. It's been over thirty-five years."

Elizabeth was dumbstruck at hearing this crazy story. Or was it crazy? Many people were becoming well known for being psychic. What was the name of that woman who wrote books and was constantly on talk shows? Sylvia

Browne. People were begging her for readings. And what about John Edward? He had written many books and had his own show too.

Something inside Elizabeth encouraged her to return yet again.

At the beginning of her third reading, Elizabeth finally had the courage to ask about the massage table against the wall. What was that all about?

“Oh, that?” Emily said. “That’s my healing table. I offer energy healings as part of a client’s session. Sometimes clients like to have a healing and then a reading after. It gives me more insight into a person’s problems. You know when something is bothering you, but you can’t put your finger on it?”

Elizabeth made a face. *Are you kidding me? Okay, so here is the funny business. I knew some weird shit would eventually pop up! I can get up and leave right now if I want. I don’t think she’d stop me.* But something held Elizabeth back. Curiosity? Some spirit?

“Yeah, I guess so,” Elizabeth said in response to Emily. “Isn’t that your subconscious niggling you? Unresolved issues coming to the forefront of your mind? I took a few psych classes in college ...” She trailed off.

“Energy healing has been around for centuries! The Egyptians used it, the Greeks, the Hindus, and it’s still popular in the East. The healer harnesses the energy and directs it to certain parts of the body. This clears the body of negative energy or energetic imbalances. It makes you feel better, refreshed usually. I had a teacher for years

that taught me the technique. Want to try it? I don't touch you or anything."

Elizabeth didn't answer right away, and Emily seemed to sense her apprehension. The candle flickered on the little white wicker table while Elizabeth considered the offer. "Okay," Elizabeth said. "I'll give it a try." *Am I really going to do this? Oh my God.*

Emily gave her a few instructions. "Lie down, facing upward on the massage table; close your eyes; and just breathe normally." She explained that her hands would be above Elizabeth, about eighteen inches or so, and wouldn't touch her body. She would say some prayers first and then ask Elizabeth for her permission for the healing. "It all has to do with free will," Emily said. "If you want to stop, just say so at any time, okay?"

"Got it. Okay."

All of a sudden some music started playing with a woman singing, or was that chanting? Elizabeth opened her eyes and asked what the music was.

"That's a CD of my guru, Shri Ma, chanting a healing prayer. It gives juice to the healing. Shri Ma and I are connected energetically, so she helps me help you."

Emily began, "I call upon the universe and ask for and invite the holy presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit and Jesus into this room. I call upon and invite the archangel Michael to protect us with his divine blue light during this healing. I also ask and invite the love and guidance of Elizabeth's angels and spirit guides as well as mine. Elizabeth, I ask you at this time for your permission to continue with this healing."

“Yes,” Elizabeth whispered.

“I now seal this room in the white light of love. If any spirits enter our session who are not here for our highest and best purpose, I ask that archangel Michael and his band of mercy escort these spirits to the light for their own progress and prosperity. And so it is.”

Elizabeth tried to relax. Her breathing slowed, and she slipped into a light meditation, calming her mind as her karate teacher had always instructed her. The ceiling fan rotated slowly, moving the air ever so slightly. The sweet, melodic chanting drew Elizabeth deeper into the table. Slowly, slowly, she relaxed and let go.

With arms outstretched over her client, Emily moved her hands just above the center of Elizabeth’s body. As Emily stopped periodically over certain spots, Elizabeth could feel a slight warmth emanating from Emily’s hands. Was this possible?

When Emily reached the top of Elizabeth’s head, she shifted to the left side and began her way down. Ever so curious, Elizabeth barely opened one eye to see Emily’s hands hovering over her heart for several seconds and then continuing on. The healer, with eyes closed, deep in concentration, returned back to where she’d started at the feet. She gently whispered more prayers, and the music stopped.

“Okay, Elizabeth, you can get up slowly when you’re ready,” Emily said and went back to her seat to wait.

Elizabeth lay there for a few seconds with her eyes open watching the ceiling fan. She sat up slowly and looked at Emily.

“How do you feel?” Emily asked.

“Actually, pretty good. Like I just shared a good laugh with friends. Lighter. Does that make sense?”

“Of course! I was careful not to blast you with too much energy, especially for your first healing. If I had, you would have an even stronger sense of lightness. I did notice some debris in your chakras. I cleared that, though.”

Before Elizabeth answered, she checked in with herself again, making sure she wasn’t getting carried away with suggestion. If this was as real as it seemed to be, she wanted to learn more about it. “Chakras? Oh yeah, I’ve learned a little about that in karate. My instructor says they are meridians or something ...?”

“Very good! So you already know a little bit about energy. The body is comprised of energy, and the chakras and meridians are the centers through which energy flows. Experiences we go through, our thoughts, or our attitudes can and will cause imbalance or blockages and stagnate in the chakras. When the centers are blocked in this way, you might start to feel a bit sick or not like yourself. “Healing is an ancient practice,” Emily said. She added, “Is there a habit you’re trying to break? Because your second chakra was really dark.”

Elizabeth’s face turned red. She wasn’t ready to disclose anything about that, not yet. “No. Why would you ask that?” she said a bit too defensively.

Emily hesitated for a second and continued, “We only have a few more minutes, so I won’t keep you much longer. I was thinking you might be interested in a book on the chakras. I have an excellent one written by a well-known

psychic that also happens to have a master's in counseling psychology and a PHD in psychology, Doreen Virtue. I can loan it to you, but I'll need it back."

Elizabeth noticed all the books and CDs lined up on the bookshelf and wondered if they were all Emily's or borrowed from the front shop of Blessings. Walking over to the shelf, she noticed a CD set called *Energy Anatomy* by someone named Caroline Myss. She picked up the thick case containing several CDs and turned it over. "Personal Power, Spirituality, and Health," the tagline read. *Sounds interesting.*

"That's a really good series." Emily motioned to the CD jacket. "You can borrow that too, if you like."

"Thanks, Emily, I appreciate that." Elizabeth sat down and did something she had not yet done with Emily before. She pulled out her calendar and asked Emily if she was available in three weeks. "I'd like to do a healing and a reading again." The words came out of her mouth without hesitation or fear.

It was a cold and misty afternoon, and Elizabeth needed her windshield wipers on as she headed for home, driving a bit more slowly. Reflecting on the session and healing, she felt empowered. Some secret place in her spirit was revealing more of itself to her. Like the layers of an onion, it was difficult to remove the first few layers, but as she moved beyond that, it was getting easier. *Perhaps I've begun something I was always meant to do*, she thought.

She thought about a significant day in her childhood when she'd seen something she had come to call sparkles, a cluster of them in the corner of her bedroom. Her eyes

had grown wide and large, just like her smile. Elizabeth knew that everyone had guardian angels. She had been taught that as a baby. Sometimes in church she could see them near the crucifix, reassuring her that her special angel was watching her and making sure she was safe.

This particular night that Elizabeth had seen the sparkles, she had been feeling very alone. Her mother had gone to an evening class at the university. Her brother Drew, was supposed to stay home and watch her, but, as usual, he'd left for his girlfriend's. This happened all the time. Elizabeth was trying to be a big girl and not let the sounds of the empty house frighten her. At nighttime, though, it was always scary. Reading her book, Elizabeth tried to ignore that last sound, but it *really* sounded like someone was trying to get in the back door!

"God, please, please, please, don't let anyone come in here," she whispered. Warm tears began to slide down her face. "Please, angel, don't let anyone hurt me!"

Elizabeth quietly slid off her bed and tiptoed over to the corner of her bedroom and crouched down low. Only her reading light near the bed was on, which allowed her to hide in the shadows. She looked at her watch. Her mother would not be home for another two hours or so, and Drew always snuck in just before their mom got home.

What am I gonna do? Trying not to whimper, Elizabeth talked to her angel again as her tears continued to fall. "Angel, please come and be with me. I'm so scared. I need you, please!" With her eyes closed, she began to pray the Hail Mary. Mary was a mom; she would help her. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee ..."

Oh no! Was that another noise? Elizabeth was starting to become nauseated. She ducked down further in her spot and held her breath. And waited. After a moment the sparkles emerged in the opposite corner right near the ceiling. “Angel? Angel? Is that you?” Elizabeth was flooded with relief as the sparkles became brighter and larger. The corner was illuminated with light that gently reflected upon Elizabeth’s face. Her heart raced, not from the fear she had known earlier but from gratitude. The room instantly felt different. It was peaceful. It was calming. Elizabeth was no longer terrified but in awe of having something or someone come to her aid when she needed it most.

As the sparkles dissipated and the light dimmed, Elizabeth could just barely see a form. It was almost transparent but clearly the outline of an angel. She could even see the wings.

As her smile deepened, eyes bedazzled with love, she asked, “What should I call you?” There was no answer. “What is your name?” Again, no answer.

The form began to fade, but Elizabeth was not worried. In her heart, she felt this uncanny sense of knowing that conversations were spoken there in the heart and not with the voice. *All is well*, she kept hearing in her heart. *All is well*.

The light was gone now; she could only see the dimness of her little lamp beside her bed. Her bedroom felt cozy, just as it did when the house was full of people. She flicked on her room light and walked over to the corner where the angel had been, looking for traces of ...

something. There were none. No light, no sparkles. Just a memory that lingered.

Elizabeth felt brave, powerful. She opened her bedroom door and made her way down the hallway, turning all the lights on as she went. She went downstairs, passing through the living room, then through the dining room, and finally into the kitchen. With her hands on her hips, she looked directly at the glass door, the very one she had thought the intruder was trying to break into. The door was shut and locked, and the chain was still on. She flipped the outdoor light on, and nothing looked different outside. There was no bad man running across the lawn. Nothing seemed different from when she'd first locked the door at sundown.

All is well. All is well.

She grabbed a Fig Newton from the cookie jar and headed upstairs. She didn't run up the stairs as she usually did when she was alone at night; she walked like a big girl.

That night, the frightful, scary world as she'd known it had shifted. It wasn't as bad. Knowing that she was being watched and loved and cared about from afar gave her a sense of peace. The world in which Elizabeth maneuvered was still dependent upon adults, adults who would make decisions for her until she was a grown-up herself. Still, what she had encountered this night had given her a strength that would be with her the rest of her life.

Lee was a close friend of Elizabeth's. Their boys had started preschool together many years ago. Lee and

Elizabeth had managed to stay friends over the years even though there was an ebb and flow to the friendship.

As Elizabeth dialed Lee's number, she thought about what she would say. "I've been going to get readings and healings from a lady in Half Moon Bay"? Probably. Lee was one of the most open-minded people she knew, and Elizabeth loved her for it.

Elizabeth got Lee's voice mail. *Shit*, she thought. *I really wanted to talk!* "Hi, sweetie! It's me. I really need to talk. I have some very interesting news. Call me back when ya can."

Elizabeth's cell phone rang back almost immediately. It was Lee. That was fast.

"Hey, sweetie!" Elizabeth said. "How are you? Are you out of school?"

"Hi! Yeah, we just got out. The kids were crazy today! I'm exhausted. I have just enough energy to drive myself home," Lee said half joking. She adored the special-needs kids she taught. It was truly a uniquely talented person that could stay in special education for over twenty years. Lee was an angel in disguise.

"So what's up?" Lee asked. "I got your voice mail. Sounds pretty juicy!"

Elizabeth almost didn't know where to start. "I've been up to no good, and you're going to be shocked at what I've been doing!"

Lee squealed with delight. She was always up for a good story, especially if it involved something naughty. "Okay, I'm sitting down listening."

Elizabeth said, "Remember Amanda, my massage therapist? Well, she moved again, this time to Half Moon

Bay. Initially, I was kinda pissed because she keeps moving, but she's really good at massage. So I went to her new place."

"Okay, so ...?" Lee clearly wasn't feeling it.

"It's a holistic healing center. Get this: they have a marriage counselor who is also a supposed intuitive, a chiropractor, Amanda, and a medium. The medium also does healings. Her name is Emily Gordon, and I've been going to see her!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"You've been seeing a medium! No way! Jeez, Elizabeth, why didn't you take me? You know I love that stuff!"

"I know; I'm sorry. It just kinda happened. I've been going during the day so Mr. Happiness doesn't find out." This was Elizabeth's nickname for her husband, Jack. He could be a real hothead after a few beers, and she didn't want to whack the beehive and start any trouble.

"What was she like? What did she say? How many times have you gone?" Lee asked in a rush. She was excited for Elizabeth. They talked about the paranormal and spirituality all the time, so it was a comfortable subject for both of them.

Laughing at her friend's excitement, Elizabeth said, "She's awesome. I was really skeptical when I first met her, but she told me things that no one could know, not even Amanda. So I kept going back at seventy dollars a pop. I've had a lot of readings and healings. I can't describe it, Lee. It feels like my body is infused with ... peace."

Lee and Elizabeth would often have deep conversations about the metaphysical with a glass of wine while sitting in Lee's garden. Elizabeth felt like Lee's garden was a

magical place. Lee had a true gift for gardening. Under the orange tree, they would talk for hours about anything and everything. There was a sense of comfort and trust in their friendship where trust was of the highest importance.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Lee said. "Remember I had a few sessions with my neighbor the Reiki teacher? It sounds like the same thing. It's the energy they work with, right? Alana calls it chi, though."

"Yes, that's it! My karate teacher says the same thing. It's crazy. I'm really getting into this. Emily has been loaning me books and CDs about spiritual growth, healings, Native American lore, and even stuff about angels. I've been keeping a journal, and Emily says I should document my dreams too."

"And Jack doesn't know anything? How the hell are you managing that! Be careful, hon. Don't get yourself into trouble," Lee warned.

"I know, I know. Something is drawing me deeper. In one sense it feels very familiar; in another, it's completely otherworldly. You know me; I can be a huge skeptic. But not this time. It feels right, like I am quenching a huge thirst. As far as Jack goes, what he doesn't know won't hurt him." Elizabeth knew, having been married to the man for seventeen years, what Jack was like.

Lee chuckled. "Jack's a good guy, Elizabeth. He loves you a lot too. Most guys just aren't receptive about spirituality. I think it scares them. You know, they have to be the one in charge, all that macho crap."

"You can say that again! No, I think I'll keep it to myself. He'll think I'm turning into a witch, like he thought

when we were in high school.” Elizabeth smiled at the thought. “When I was a junior, I started reading a lot about witchcraft. There were these weird shops in the Haight, in the city, back in the day. I’d buy books and herbs, things like that. I was a Catholic schoolgirl being naughty ... I never actually did anything to anyone, but it still freaked him out. It didn’t scare him enough, though—he married me anyway!” Elizabeth laughed.

“Aww. See, a happy ending after all. Hey, I gotta go. Tom is coming home in a while, and I have to get something going for dinner. I’ll call ya tomorrow.”

“Okay. Hope I didn’t talk your ear off! Love you!”

“Never. Love you too. Bye.” Lee hung up.

As Elizabeth hung up, she realized how much she appreciated having been heard. Her friend was always so supportive on the subject. Lee didn’t judge, just listened. *Friends like that don’t come around very often in your lifetime*, Elizabeth thought. *I need to tell her that the next time I see her.*

After waiting for ten minutes or so, Elizabeth figured the potential tenant for her Palo Alto fourplex was either going to be late or a no-show. Purchasing the fourplex had been one of the smartest moves she had ever made. She had acquired the building, which was solely in her trust, after her dad had died. Being a property manager and landlord was good for her. Most importantly, she enjoyed it, enjoyed providing safe, clean homes for people.

As she waited, she opened her journal lying on the front seat and read the latest entry. “The Ranter,” Elizabeth’s

journal, held the white-hot truths of her thoughts, usually angry ones.

Adapting. Constantly adapting. I guess this makes life a little more digestible for me. Now that I'm reaching my fortieth year, things are changing! I suppose one could speculate that this is a time of reflection—of my past, my present, and what the hell about my future!! Who knows. It makes my head swell with weight.

I feel like crap. I look like crap. I'm crap. So why the need to unravel everything?? Maybe because I am so worried that I can't move. I need some kind of outlet that will release these toxins (of the mind) I seem to be trudging along with.

I remember reading a book a few years back, about a man who said he was living his life without really feeling it, like he was an imposter in his own skin, a spectator in his own life. I couldn't understand his meaning. I thought, *How the HELL could you NOT feel your own life?? Huh??* And then time passed in my own life; things happened to me, good things and bad things. And when I began to analyze every aspect of *my* life, every miniscule, flaky detail, it dawned upon me that I could no longer feel my own life. That some transfer of brain and

body memory had transpired without my knowledge. An alien invasion.

Elizabeth looked up from “The Ranter” to see if any cars had pulled up in front of the building. *Shit. I’ll give him another twenty minutes. Then I’ll go.* She read on.

I suppose this alienated feeling develops as we grow older. Experiences mold our outlook and change what we once believed to be true or right.

Change is inevitable; this I understand deeply. The problem is when change occurs, we may not like it. Hence, perhaps our resistance creates the alienation, so we hold back, resist, trying to stop change even. We may not recognize who we’ve become. Hmmm. Something to ponder.

Now that I am older, I hope to holy God in heaven that I am learning more. I’m desperately trying to understand where it is I’m going ... but most of all, *how did I get here?*

Why?

In some secret part of my brain, I harbor the hope that all people get to a pressured, critical time in their lives where they question almost everything that has changed and shifted—themselves, their relationships, friends, family ... even why the hell do I shop here anyway?

Do we all come to a point in our lives and check off experiences like a grocery list? Okay, check off milk, eggs, bread, love, sex, marriage, job, education, children, homeowner, mortgage owner, property owner, second mortgage owner, midlife crisis, extra pounds, less hair, wrinkles, realizing I'm not so cute anymore ... Jesus! I can hardly wait to go shopping next week! I'll be asking for paper *and* plastic. Paper to cover my head, plastic to cover my rear end. Worst of all, I keep seeing Jack ogle other women. He stares at them until he gets a look back! Then he smiles. Why does he do this right in front of me? What does he do when I'm not around? End of rant.

Elizabeth closed "The Ranter" and breathed a heavy sigh. *Jeez, guess I was having a real shitty day that day. Either that or I was PMSing.*

When Elizabeth looked up again, she noticed a man about thirty-five or so years old waiting at the steps of the building. That must be the potential tenant. She hurried out of her car and walked over and said, "Hi, are you Mark?" He nodded and handed her his business card. She smiled and asked him to follow her to the unit upstairs. *I hope he takes it*, she thought. *I have to pay the property taxes this month.*

Chapter 3

It was getting close to Christmas, and the Warren family celebrated the season with passion. The house was decorated from top to bottom. A fourteen-foot tree sat in the great room with so many white twinkling lights on it. Jack loved that tree, even when it was a pain in his ass to set it up every year. His family enjoyed it just as much as he.

It was a hectic time for everyone. With the kids' classes ending for the year, they had papers to write and exams to take. The home buzzed with activity.

"Jack? Hello ... is anyone here?" Elizabeth stuck her head in from the garage and yelled again. "Hey, I need helpers to unload the groceries!"

Jack looked up from the couch and could see his wife was flustered. He put the paper down and stood up. "Yeah, okay, okay. Where are all the kids? They should be helping out," Jack called. He walked up the flight of stairs to the garage, opened the door, and saw his wife trying to manage too many bags at once. Stubborn woman.

"Here, let me help," he said. "You should be watching that shoulder of yours; the doctor said not to place too much weight on it. Want another rotator cuff surgery?"

“Of course not! God, that was awful. I just need to get the rest of this stuff inside. I bought ice cream; it’s probably melted.” Elizabeth frowned and passed by Jack.

As Jack leaned down into the trunk of Elizabeth’s sports car and grabbed the rest of the plastic bags, thinking this probably had cost a fortune, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. It was a notebook tucked behind a blanket. He pulled the blanket back, revealing some books on chakras and healing. There were also a couple of cases with CDs in them, something about spiritual healing. Quickly, before Elizabeth came back, he yelled, “Hey, I’ve got the rest of these!” *That should buy me a minute of time*, he thought.

Placing the bags back down in the trunk, he grabbed the notebook and began to ruffle through it. It was a journal of some sort, in Elizabeth’s writing. He began to read about some woman named Emily and sessions she and Elizabeth had on healing ... Jack’s stomach tightened up. “What is this ...?” he muttered.

He read on, just little snippets about dreams and prayers. There were pages and pages filled. Then he stopped, figuring it was best to come back and read *all* of it when Elizabeth wasn’t around. He slammed the trunk shut, stopped to compose himself, and headed to the kitchen. Dropping the bags on the kitchen island, he asked, “What’s for dinner? I’m getting kinda hungry.”

Elizabeth looked up from the refrigerator drawer. “I’m going as fast as I can, dude. Want some cheese and salami? Go sit down. I’ll bring it to you, okay?”

Jack cracked a beer and headed to the couch. Turning the TV on, he wondered what Elizabeth was up to. Who was Emily, and what was she teaching his wife?

Elizabeth carried in a plate of cheese, crackers, and salami and set it down on the side table next to Jack. "Why are you so grouchy?" she asked. "Did something happen at work today?"

"I'm not grouchy ... just tired. Thanks for the hors d'oeuvres." Jack turned his attention back to the news, and Elizabeth left.

Jack thought he could do one of two things. He could either wait until Elizabeth went to bed to read that journal or wait until she was out of the house with the kids and read it then. By God, he was going to see what the hell she was doing.

Later that night, Elizabeth fell into a deep sleep out of sheer exhaustion. She heard a voice but could not see who was talking to her.

"Can you hear everything I'm saying?" the voice asked.

"Yes, I can hear you."

"Do you understand this is a visitation?" asked the voice.

Elizabeth looked into the large bathroom mirror and saw that her eyes had turned bright green. "Yes, I understand. If you are evil, I will not accept you. I serve only the Lord Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mother, and all the saints. I will only serve those who come to me in goodness ... with good intentions and love for all."

As she looked around, she noticed she was sitting in the midst of a cemetery, right next to her dad's grave

site. As she sat there on the wet grass, transparent figures walked aimlessly around. Some were standing by her, just staring at her blankly. One with red eyes gestured and pointed at her to come follow him. When she did not, he became frustrated and pulled out a knife and ran at her at full throttle. "Hail Mary, full of grace ..." she recited.

Elizabeth awoke in a sweat, still reciting the prayer. Sitting up quickly, she wiped the tears from her face and placed her head in her hands. *My God, what is happening to me?* Trying to breathe normally, she looked over at Jack. He was fast asleep.

She grabbed her journal, slid out of bed, and went to the bathroom. She wrote as quickly as she could, trying to recall the last remnants of her dream. Looking up, she saw her face in the mirror. No bright-green eyes to be found.

In the morning, eyes adjusting to the dim light, Elizabeth rose from bed. She opened the bedroom curtains to look outside. *It's gonna be cold today*, she thought.

Without looking, she knew Jack had already left for work. He usually left by six o'clock, and it was almost seven thirty.

As she grabbed her dream journal off the nightstand to review last night's entry, she noticed the pen was still in the book. *Funny. I never leave it on the page I just wrote in. Maybe I was tired and not paying attention ... Or was someone reading it?*

"Jack, you bastard!" she said aloud. *Is nothing sacred and personal around here? Damn it! That's just like him.*

Elizabeth sighed and placed the book down. *I can't prove he read it, but my gut tells me he did.*

At least he had only read her dream journal. She had a couple more journals hidden in the closet, and all her spiritual journals were safely locked up in the trunk of her car, including "The Ranter." If he ever got ahold of that, he would be furious. There were some very personal feelings and opinions in it, especially about him.

I'll have to be on my guard, she thought. He's been acting distant lately. Whatever it is, I'll make a nice dinner tonight, something he really likes, and see if I can wrangle it out of him.

She planned dinner as she took a shower. She didn't have time to blow-dry her hair, as she had to do the school drop-off. She made a mental note to call Emily for another session. After taking care of the kids, she would have to finish up the Christmas shopping and make sure to have the menu straightened out for the annual Christmas dinner. This year it would be twenty-six guests. Elizabeth smiled to herself. It was nice to see her family (well, most of them) and the friends and neighbors they invited every year. This big Christmas dinner was an important tradition for the Warren family. It was a great deal of effort, but the payoff of seeing everyone enjoying themselves with the good food and lots of wine flowing (which usually placed a significant dent in the wine cellar) made it all good. The dinner made for warm memories for all of them.

As Emily sat across from Elizabeth at Blessings, they began to discuss the material that Elizabeth had been

borrowing. Each time Elizabeth came, she left with something new to read or listen to on CD. Emily had an extensive lending library and was happy to share.

“Elizabeth, I need to ask you something.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

“I think you are a truly wonderful person. You are obviously embarking on a spiritual odyssey. I can see, with my own eyes and those of the angels, that you are ready to take your education to the next level. I think you should become my student. It’s been well over a year since you’ve been coming to see me.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open; she was dumbfounded.

“Oh, close your mouth, silly,” Emily laughed. “With all the time we have spent together and the way you have been devouring all the books and CDs, it’s time to move upward, to the next plane. Listen, I have *never* asked a client to become my student, or protégé if you like. I’ve been a medium and a healer for years and years. I want you to know that I have been guided in this decision not only by my angels but by yours as well. It seems we have worked together in past lives, and this would be an extension of that. What do you think?”

Elizabeth was transfixed. “I would be honored. I think you have a God-given talent, Em. You’re the real deal.”

“Good! My teacher told me that one day it would be my turn to pass on my knowledge of reading and healing. And you’re it.”

Elizabeth was elated. Ready. Thirsting for something that could not be quenched. Finally, she was on a road

with a mentor that would guide her toward her destiny. This was an opportunity of a lifetime. Elizabeth accepted with gratitude.

“So let’s begin,” Emily said. “Let’s start on that bad habit of yours that came up in your second chakra a while back.”

“What?”

“The smoking?”

“I never told you I smoked. I don’t really. Well, um, okay. I smoke probably a pack every week and a half. It’s not a lot,” Elizabeth said feebly.

Emily smiled. “One thing you need to learn Elizabeth is that your body is the best instrument you have. If you fill it with unhealthy things, like smoke, alcohol, and junk food, you won’t be at your best for guidance. Your vibrational level will be too low. Strong energy flows from high vibrations.”

That made sense.

“Do you want to quit smoking? Because we certainly can work on it.”

At first Elizabeth hesitated. She enjoyed having a cigarette now and again outside her laundry room, especially after a good workout at the gym. That *really* was bad. Plus, the kids had been bugging her to stop for years. Maybe it was time. She turned toward Emily. “I’m ready! Let’s do it.”

“I’m so proud of you, Elizabeth! Hop on the table.” As Elizabeth got on the table, Emily continued, “As you’re meditating, I need for you to remind yourself you are no longer a smoker. Think to yourself, *I do not smoke.*”

“Okay.”

“I will also pray to archangel Rafael. He is the healing angel. He will guide you to stop this bad habit.”

The music and sweet melodic chanting began. *This feels different this time*, Elizabeth thought. *I feel so light ... so peaceful. It feels amazing!* Wave after wave of healing energy infused Elizabeth. She began to shake and shudder. Her body gently arched, and her skin felt flushed. Everything tensed and then slowly faded away. *Oh my God!*

The healing session ended. Elizabeth barely noticed that Emily was talking to her. Her body felt light with joy and peace.

“Elizabeth, come sit down when you’re ready.”

Elizabeth looked at her new teacher. “I think I just had a cosmic orgasm! I can’t describe the sensations I just felt.”

Emily smiled. “It’s awesome, isn’t it? You were ready to receive, and your spirit accepted. Well done, girl! Well done.”

Tossing her legs over the side of the table, Elizabeth sat upright. A huge smile radiated across her face. Looking around the small little room, she was mystified. Everything was the same. Nothing was different, not even Emily. But Elizabeth felt very different. Intuitively, she knew that she had just experienced a sacred and divine interaction with another realm, something hallowed.

Emily watched her pupil with a smile almost as radiant as Elizabeth’s. “When you’re ready ... come sit,” she repeated.

Elizabeth scooched off the table and sat in the white wicker chair.

“I think it’s important that you know this will *not* be an easy undertaking, Elizabeth. I know you have a very strong personality when you need it. It’s the warrior archetype in you—always ready to defend the defenseless, fight the good fight. You’ll need this strength for the next chapter we embark on. There’s good and evil in the world. In my experience, when individuals begin a spiritual journey, they will be challenged. Severely.”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes wide open and heart ready to receive.

Emily pressed on. “One more thing before we continue: you can always call me, anytime, day or night. Sometimes situations will arise where you may need guidance or support. Don’t worry about being a bother, because you won’t be.”

Emily continued, “I remember how frightening the spirits could be to a newbie, treacherous even. I was always grateful that my first teacher, Terry, was so supportive, calmly walking me through the many challenging situations that came up. I will do the same for you, Elizabeth.”

The session continued.

Elizabeth had begun to learn how important it was to write down the messages the angels had given Emily. The messages came so fast at times.

Emily said, “The angels say to give God your will and walk with him. When you feel the need to smoke, speak to your angels. Go somewhere quiet and alone and talk to them, for they are always by your side. Turn up the volume

when you cannot hear; turn down the volume when you hear buzzing.

“I see you riding a white horse surrounded by children. You’re holding ... no ... hanging on to a man. It’s like you’re trying to save him while you’re riding toward the sun. All will be well, Elizabeth; you’ll see.”

Before Elizabeth left, Emily told her about a public meditation being held at a nondenominational church in Palo Alto the following Thursday night. “The meditations are for world peace,” Emily said. “When people get together in a group meditation, stronger positive energy goes out to the planet. It would be a good experience for you.”

“Okay, I’ll be there.” Elizabeth waved as she walked out the door.

Not ready to head home just yet, Elizabeth drove to one of her favorite places, her refuge, her sanctuary—the Notre Dame de Namur University chapel.

The chapel was situated on a hilltop surrounded by hundred-year-old oak trees, huge expanses of green grass, and slow-moving deer. The chapel sat on the edge of the property owned by the university. Founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1851, the university was the fifth-oldest college in the state of California and the first college in the state authorized to grant baccalaureate degrees to women. It was Elizabeth’s alma mater.

Quickly, she parked her car and walked briskly across the lot. She walked up the stairs to the glass entryway and breathed a sigh of relief while opening the large wooden doors. She dipped her fingertips into the holy water and

made the sign of the cross while looking directly at her savior, the Lord Jesus. The sound of her footsteps was heard by no one. She was alone. Eyes not faltering on the cross, she made her way down to the very first row of wooden benches, her favorite spot.

“Thank you, Father, for all that you have bestowed upon me, upon my family.” She sat back and listened to the silence. It was comforting enough to just be there.

It had been quite a day—what an incredible experience to feel that intensity of healing, of energy. Elizabeth felt that she was coming home to a place she was destined to be. An education was being placed gently with love and respect right into her lap. She would be a fool if she allowed it to pass her by. More importantly, she couldn’t even fathom not accepting what was rightfully hers. This was meant for her. *God, who would have ever thought in a million years I’d be an apprentice to a healer, a medium.* Her heart filled with joy. She allowed herself the momentary pleasure of what the universe was bringing into her life.

But then she remembered Emily’s warning that there would be obstacles, many of them. Her heart sank at the thought that Jack would be the biggest one. As she watched the light play through the multicolored stained glass windows, she imagined that eventually she would have to come clean to her family, tell them everything. Would they laugh at her, make jokes at her expense, or, even worse, think she had gone completely insane? That would be unbearable. Elizabeth had made her life around her family, making every effort to be a respectable wife,

parent, and solid citizen in her community. People knew they could count on her. Reliable, trustworthy, dependable, good ol' Elizabeth. But now, she couldn't even fathom walking away from getting to know the real Elizabeth.

How can I tell my husband that I've been going to healing sessions and readings for over a year? He'll be furious. He won't understand; he won't want to.

The light was beginning to fade; it was getting late. One could only be running errands for so long. Slowly, she grabbed her purse, genuflected to her Lord, and walked down the long aisle of the church, uncertain of what was to come.

I sure could use a cigarette about now.

As she pulled into the driveway, a stab of guilt headed toward her heart. Jack was unloading his truck and stacking materials and tile in the garage. He smiled and waved.

"Hi! How was work?" she quickly said.

"Hi. It was okay. I'm beat. The traffic from the city was really bad this afternoon." He bent in for a kiss.

As Jack told her about some guys that he worked with, out of the corner of her eye Elizabeth saw her, the nosy neighbor across the street. When she and Jack had first moved into the neighborhood years ago, he'd dubbed her the "The Red Cow" because of her flaming-red hair and very large body. The name had stuck. There she was, standing at her living room window, with her arms crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face, staring at Jack and Elizabeth talking in their driveway.

"What is her problem? God, I don't get it. What did we ever do to her?" Elizabeth sputtered.

“Yeah, I know. She’s been up there since I got home. I just ignore her. I think there’s something really wrong with her. After living in this neighborhood for eighteen years, you’d think she’d get bored with what we’re up to. Maybe it’s entertainment. We’ve got three kids; her daughter moved out and got married ... Who knows.” Jack chuckled.

“I know you’re right. Most neighbors on this block say she’s a weirdo, keeps to herself. Poor Henry. It must be shitty living with her.”

Henry was the Red Cow’s husband. They had been married for probably thirty years. His half-assed attempts at a friendship with Jack had been sad. He’d always been borrowing Jack’s tools and asking for help with tile work in their house. “Hey, can you cut this wood up for me? I don’t have a chainsaw ... Blah, blah, blah.” Jack finally had gotten fed up. There had never been any thank-yous, and tools had been returned broken or with parts missing.

The final straw had been when Jack had gone up to help Henry replace a window that some neighborhood kids had broken. Elizabeth recalled the story that Jack had once told her. It had been a hot day, and Jack and Henry had been working for a few hours. They’d finally gotten the window installed. Both men had been tired and parched.

“Hey, you want something to drink?” Henry had asked. “I’ll go get something.” Henry had headed for the back sliding glass door, and Jack had followed. As soon as they’d reached the door, Henry had said, “Um, I don’t think you should come in ... My wife doesn’t like people

in the house when she's not here." Henry had shrugged his shoulders and slid the door in Jack's face.

Okay, whatever, Jack had thought. *There are probably dead bodies hidden in the basement*. Jack hadn't particularly wanted to go in anyway. *Bad vibes*, he'd thought.

After a bit, Henry had opened the sliding door and handed Jack a warm Diet Pepsi. Jack had been flabbergasted. After all that work, Henry hadn't even had a cold beer to offer on a scorching-hot day! *He knew I was coming over today*, Jack had thought. *This guy sucks!*

"I'll see ya," Jack had said, and he'd turned on his heel and left.

Elizabeth and Jack continued their conversation on the driveway. Elizabeth just turned her back on the crazy woman. She had learned over time that the Red Cow was just a busybody. The Warrens and some of the other neighbors on the block had given up on any more attempts at friendship.

Closing her curtains finally, the Red Cow pretended to walk away from her perch at the window, but Elizabeth could still see her peering out the side of the closed curtains. The lights behind her illuminated her frame.

"Oh brother, will you look at that!" Elizabeth pointed to the house across the street. Jack and she both shook their heads.

"Remember when we bought that Eddie Bauer Explorer?" Elizabeth asked. "It was the first time we'd bought a new car since we had been married. God, I was so proud of that." Elizabeth grinned at the memory. "Then six months later, the Red Cow comes driving up the street

with the *same* car—the year, the color, inside and out! The only difference was that hers was an XLT. She just stared at the kids and me as we watched her drive by. Now that was freaking weird!”

“I know! What about when we added on to the house? Henry and the Red Cow would come down and take pictures of all the construction. Henry admitted it to me. The worst part, I think, is that they had the fucking balls to put on the *exact* same tile roof that we put on. They hired our roofing contractor and insisted he put on our tile roof!” Jack had recounted this story many times to friends and family, and Elizabeth knew it still annoyed him, even to this very day.

“Well, there’s not a lot we can do, right? Or is there?” Elizabeth asked.

They started to walk back into the house, not bothering to look up to see if they were being watched. Then Elizabeth stopped in her tracks, spun around, and spotted the Red Cow back at the front window. “I should go up there and confront her,” Elizabeth sputtered.

“What? Seriously?” Jack was shocked.

“Maybe if someone talks to her, she’ll stop doing it ... I don’t know. It’s worth a try.”

“You’re a grown woman; do what you like, but I don’t think it’s going to make any difference. She’s been like this for years.” Jack shrugged his shoulders and went inside.

Elizabeth walked across the street toward the cream-colored house. It galled her that they had painted their house the same color as Jack’s and hers. She walked down the gray cement path that led to the wooden glass

door. She could see faints lights in the living room. It looked like the TV was on as well.

She knocked on the door. There was no answer. She rang the bell and kept her finger on it, pushing, pushing, pushing. Ring ... ring ... ring ... ring.

The door swung open. There she stood, the Red Cow, looking mad as hell, her eyes squinting, mouth snarling. She was wearing an old yellow housecoat that strained over her bosom. Her pink slippers were dirty, with clops of mud on them. Her flaming-red hair was in a sloppy ponytail.

“What the hell do you want?” she blared. “You’ve got some nerve ringing my doorbell like that!”

Elizabeth was not about to back down. “My husband, Jack, and I are tired of your nosy-neighbor antics, hiding in the window watching everything our family does. Copying our car, our roof, the *color* of our house! Going on our property *without* permission and taking pictures of our construction! Your husband borrowing tools only to return them broken! Calling the police on a moving van that was in front of the house ... not even blocking the street. Calling the police whenever we have a party and that time when a car was parked outside the house for more than three days. You knew we were on vacation! The police have told us it’s the same person calling over and over. You giving us the middle finger as you drive by! Or talking to the other neighbors, making up lies about our kids, saying they’re on drugs! I could go on and on! *What is your problem?* What in God’s name have we ever done to you or your family?”

There was silence.

Then the Red Cow said, “You think you can come up here and knock on my door all high and mighty! Who do you think you are? The queen of the neighborhood? With that new house and flashy sports car ... buying cars for your kids that are taking up room on the street. All the neighbors had to put up with that year of construction on that McMansion! You think you’re better than me because you have neighbors over for parties and holidays! You think you’re so special because you’re young! Just because my husband, Henry, looks at your ass while you garden outside doesn’t mean he *likes you*! Just because he stops his car to talk to you all the time doesn’t mean he *likes you*!”

Elizabeth took a giant step backward, nearly falling off the porch. “My family and I have never done anything to you. This is ridiculous!” Elizabeth shook her head. It was obvious that this woman had her own issues that had nothing to do with the Warrens. “*Leave my family alone!* Or I’ll start calling the cops on you for harassment!”

On that note Elizabeth turned on her heel and left. All the while, the Red Cow continued yelling.

Jack was sitting on the couch, watching TV, when Elizabeth walked in.

“That woman is nuts,” she said.

Jack turned to look at his wife. “Really? Well, we kinda knew that already.”

Elizabeth recounted the whole story to him. He shook his head in amazement.

“Maybe she’ll stop; maybe she won’t. Either way, I said my piece.”

“Maybe,” Jack said as he turned back to the TV.

One year later, the Red Cow’s house went up for sale and sold in two weeks. It was rumored that Henry had divorced her on terms of cruel and unusual punishment.

One night after dinner, Elizabeth asked the kids to clean up the dishes and put the food away. She wanted to listen to the new Caroline Myss CDs she’d gotten on the chakras, *Advanced Energy Anatomy*. She didn’t want to waste any time. Jack would be watching the Giants baseball game, so he would be distracted. She headed down to their bedroom and shut the doors behind her.

Elizabeth had established a routine over a year ago for how to approach new material. She would listen to the healing CDs or read the material through once, and then she would go back and listen or read a second time while taking notes. She always took her notes carefully, making sure she understood the concepts. If she didn’t, she would bring the concept up to Emily, and they would discuss the topic extensively.

At Emily and Elizabeth’s next session they spoke about the principles of co-creation and how one has the power of choice and how those choices create consequences.

“It seems like you’re really doing your homework,” Emily said. “I’m proud of you. Have you said anything to Jack about our work here?”

Consequences, Elizabeth thought wryly. “Not really. I did say Amanda had a coworker who was a medium.”

“Really? I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at that conversation.” Emily clutched her middle in laughter. She was beginning to understand Jack.

“Yeah, well, he wasn’t too receptive to the idea.” Elizabeth looked down as she spoke. Jack had made it very clear what he thought of mediums: they were a rip-off, con artists who suckered people out of their hard-earned money. He’d balked at every lighthearted remark she’d made. All the while, she’d kept thinking that he truly might be incapable of understanding how incredible this experience has been for her.

“Elizabeth, I can see he loves you very much,” Emily said. “He’s worried. He probably notices some changes in you. For God’s sakes, you’ve embarked upon a spiritual journey! It is very common to have someone close to you become your largest opposition. It’s almost a requirement! Look, maybe it’s your time to be completely open, upfront.”

“No way, Em. I know my husband. I love him with all my heart, but he can’t fathom beyond what he knows. It’s not even up for consideration. He believes in God and is respectful to most of the ideas of the Catholic Church. But he draws the line there.

“The other day, I mentioned to Molly she should pray to her guardian angel to sit on her shoulder to help her focus on an upcoming test. She was nervous about it. Jack overheard my comment, then rolled his eyes and said, ‘She needs to study, not pray to angels!’”

Emily looked at Elizabeth with a trace of sadness. “Be patient with him. You’ll know when the right time comes.”

Elizabeth nodded. "Well, at least I have some good news! I haven't had a cigarette in weeks!"

"Really?" Emily said. "Good for you! Not even one?"

"Um, well, yes and no." She smiled meekly. "I was outside the laundry room one day; that's typically where I go to smoke."

"Okaaaay, then what happened?" Emily couldn't help but grin.

"I was so stressed and had to have one. I lit up, took a couple of drags, and began to really enjoy it. Then after a few seconds I felt sick, really light-headed and nauseous. I started gagging and choking, and I threw up ... It was awful. I haven't smoked since." Shaking her head, Elizabeth looked away.

"Elizabeth, I never told you this before, but, at that healing session, I asked the angels to make it so that if you were to smoke, you would vomit ... every time."

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. "Seriously? Well, it worked."

"Do you have any cravings?"

"Yes. Stress does it every time. I do jumping jacks when I get the urge. Plus, I recite, 'I will not smoke ... I will not smoke.' It's been helping." Elizabeth laughed.

Shifting gears, Emily said, "I want to try something. Call upon the spirit of your dad. He's here right now."

"What?" Elizabeth was shocked.

"Your dad ... he's here and wants to talk to you. You've already said your protection prayers, and I can see blessed Mary's blue mantle around you. Say, 'I call upon the spirit of ...' What's his name again?"

“Arne Erickson,” Elizabeth replied.

“Okay, good. Go ahead.”

Elizabeth hesitated. It was one thing hearing Emily say that hundreds of times. It was another when *she* was the one on the hot seat.

“Elizabeth, remember the session when I mentioned that I could see you about to dive into a crystal-blue lagoon? An enormous number of angels and family members stood around you, smiling and encouraging you to jump?”

Elizabeth remembered that session well. Emily had spoken of a beautiful blue lagoon in paradise with lush green tropical foliage and flowers and vines fragrant and blazing with color. It was one of her favorite images. It provided refuge when fear and self-doubt crept into the recesses of her mind, like now. She dove.

“I ask to be raised to the highest level of consciousness and understanding. I call upon the ascended masters for wisdom and healing purposes only. I ask that the living God be present ...” Elizabeth continued on, only stopping when she forgot a phrase, which Em provided.

The room fell silent.

Elizabeth had her eyes closed throughout the prayer even as she called upon the spirit of her dead father. A very faint light began to emerge from the darkness. Elizabeth held her breath. “Dad? Dad? Is that you? Daddy?” Adrenaline pumping, Elizabeth could barely breathe.

“What do you see?” Emily asked.

“Well, it looks like a negative. The image, I mean. Like a negative from a picture developed at the drugstore.”

“Good. Very good. You are viewing images from your third eye. When your ability gets stronger, it will look like you’re watching a movie. What does the image look like?”

“I see a figure of a man in a white robe with a hood. His face is dark. His hands are spread wide open; they’re dark too. His arms under the robe are reaching out to me, as if to embrace.”

“Ask him who he serves, Elizabeth. This is very important because there are plenty of bad spirits out there that will try to mess you up and trick you. And they will,” Emily cautioned.

“Who do you serve?” Elizabeth asked. She got no response. She shook her head and opened her eyes. “I don’t see anything else. What do I do now?”

“You’re doing great! Don’t give up. I’m getting that it’s Jesus. He’s the first ascended master you called upon, so he was the first to show up. Oh, your Dad is back!”

Emily addressed Elizabeth’s father. “My name is Emily Larkin. I’m a medium and a friend of your daughter, Elizabeth.”

Emily then said to Elizabeth, “He’s wearing some kind of official-looking hat. It has some braiding on the front, right above the brim.”

Arne had been a captain of many large cargo ships that had sailed the seven seas. He’d worked for President American Lines, a billion-dollar company that spanned the world’s ports.

“He wants you to know he has always been so proud of you. He understands that his passing was a trauma for you and the family.”

Trauma? Her house had been torn down from the reconstruction, so she, Jack, and their three children had been relocated for two years, and her dad had passed in the midst of it all. Yeah, it had been a trauma!

“He says that you are an incredible woman, a woman of grace. He says that he will wait for you on the other side.”

The tears began to fall. Elizabeth closed her eyes again, hoping to see a glimpse of ... something, but the image of Jesus had fled away as quickly as it had appeared.

A wave of sadness crossed her heart. The pain from her father's death and the aftermath of handling his estate had been excruciating, but through it all, she'd tried to remain strong for her family. She'd carried that suffering quietly, taking great strides to protect her children from so much change.

When Elizabeth looked up, Emily handed her a box of tissues. Emily sat quietly beside Elizabeth as she cried.

The following week, Elizabeth headed out to visit her mom. The hour it took to drive there gave her the opportunity to think undisturbed. She rehashed the ups and downs of her last session with Emily. Even though she had second-guessed herself about her spiritual education, she could not deny it was feeding a deep-seated need.

She knew the outline of Jesus that she'd seen hadn't been a figment of her imagination, because Emily had been able to see it too. Even though Elizabeth had become frustrated at the very moment she'd tried to speak with

her father's spirit, she'd done pretty well. And that was encouraging.

Knocking on the front door of her mother's house, Elizabeth pulled the pensive look off her face and replaced it with a smile.

The door opened.

"Hi, Mom!" she said with a beaming smile and a big hug to go with it.

"Hi, yourself! You look nice. I like that jacket. C'mon in."

Elizabeth walked through the door and took a quick survey of the front room. It was spick-and-span as usual—antiques polished, Persian carpet vacuumed, venetian mirrors gleaming.

"I brought you some chocolate chip cookies the girls made last night. They're pretty good. I wasn't sure if they were actually gonna make cookies or just eat the dough." Elizabeth laughed.

"Aww, thank you. Give Charlotte and Molly a big hug and kiss from Nonnie for me, will you? I was making some tea; want some? How are they doing anyway? How's Justin?"

Elizabeth's mother, Victoria, had said many times over the years that being a grandmother was one of her favorite roles. She adored all her grandkids. She said they were one of life's greatest pleasures, except for fine champagne and Ferragamo shoes.

Elizabeth filled her mom in on all the news, who was doing what, how Jack was working too hard ... blah, blah, blah.

There were times when Victoria was able to gracefully inquire about her daughter's welfare, but she sensed that

today was not one of them. Something was amiss, but Elizabeth would divulge whatever it was in her own time.

Instead, Victoria walked to the living room, across the Persian carpet, and to the French antique bookcase, where she kept her prized photo albums. The volumes of pictures recorded many years of travels with her family and some of just Victoria alone. There were wedding albums and baby albums. The albums represented so many lives with so many memories—a lifetime, all upon the confines of sticky cardboard pages covered in a sheets of plastic.

A few albums remained from Victoria's childhood. These held black paper pages and photographs outlined with grosgrain trim—black and white and faded. One could still make out the faces of the children at the beach and their parents hamming it up in front of the camera, the men flexing their muscles and the ladies sitting demurely, hands in their laps and ankles discreetly tucked one behind the other.

Victoria was always so animated in her storytelling. Pointing to this picture or that, she regaled Elizabeth with tales about one relative or another. It was comforting to Elizabeth to hear about all the trials and tribulations of her ancestors. Life could be difficult for everyone. No one left it unscathed.

“Look at this one! Oh, you were just a little girl then!” Her mom pointed to one of several photographs of the two of them in Tromsø, Norway. It had been taken during the summer when Elizabeth was about four or five. They had been visiting Bestemor and FarFar, Elizabeth's paternal grandparents.

Elizabeth was grateful for the photos because they helped her to remember the visit. Her father's parents had been kind and gracious. They'd barely spoken a word of English, but between gesturing and repetitive motions, everyone had made it through the rough patches. They had visited not only Norway on that trip but also Sweden and Denmark.

"You were such a good little traveler, never complaining," Elizabeth's mom said. "You hardly ever cried, even on the flight over. Complete strangers would stop me and say you were a supermarket child!"

Elizabeth smiled at the reference and was not surprised when her mother launched into the story behind the name. Victoria loved to retell the story, and the tale always seemed to cheer Elizabeth's spirits.

"People were fascinated with the idea of our American supermarkets," her mom said, "shelves and shelves of anything you could possibly want! One man said to me, 'If I were to go into a supermarket, I would pick your lovely daughter. Not only is she beautiful, but she has perfect manners. I didn't even know there was a child on the plane!'"

Her mom pointed to another photo and said, "Here you are riding a reindeer, looking like a little princess. The Laplanders loved that you wanted to ride their animals. FarFar was right there just outside of the picture making sure you didn't fall. He adored you."

Elizabeth appreciated her mom's effort to cheer her up.

"Here, we're in Denmark. Do you remember?" Victoria's eyes shone with delight of the past as she pointed to

the next picture. “That day we went to Tivoli Gardens. It was such a beautiful day. The sun was shining, there were blue skies above, and the vast gardens were so lovely. You could hardly wait to get on some of the rides there. The merry-go-round was your absolute favorite! You must have ridden it four or five times. It was so funny because there was only one animal you wanted to be on: a dazzling white stallion. I could barely place you on top. You insisted, though; it was the only one you’d ride. All the other children would dash for the lions or the tigers, but you, just the white horse.”

Elizabeth recalled how enchanting that huge horse had been. Her mom was right; it had been the only one she’d wanted. *Oh my God!* Elizabeth took in a sharp breath. A thought had just dawned upon her. In one of her first readings, Emily had said she’d seen Elizabeth on a white horse surrounded by children heading toward the sun. In the image Elizabeth had one hand on the horse’s reins and the other hanging on to a man, drawing him closer to God.

It was moments like these that solidified Elizabeth’s choice to remain on her path.

Chapter 4

It was the night before Jack and Elizabeth were to leave on their Italian adventure. They had been planning it for months, every detail on their itinerary created especially for them by their travel agent. Elizabeth was feverishly looking for the special beads that had belonged to her beloved grandmother Cecelia. Back before Elizabeth had been born, Cece had purchased the crystal beads at the official Vatican store in Rome. They had been blessed by Pope John XXIII. Elizabeth treasured them. Besides, how could she possibly go to Italy without Nonnie's rosary beads?

Sitting down on her bed, she tried to compose herself. Breathing deeply, she looked around at all the luggage they were to bring. She got excited all over again that they were *really* going. She checked the luggage tags, making sure the names and addresses were all in order. She stopped and whispered, "Where do you want me to go, Nonnie?" She felt a little tug on her solar plexus, her third chakra.

Elizabeth went over to the large walk-in closet and looked up. On the top shelf was a small black storage

container that held old photographs. She grasped the box and opened the lid. Underneath stacks and stacks of pictures were a roll of silver dollars and the crystal beads. Tears shone in her eyes. "I love you, Nonnie. Thank you," she whispered. *I am bringing them back to Rome*, she thought. *They were hers, and I'm carrying her with me.* As she placed the beads in the zipped compartment of her purse, Elizabeth felt a jolt of pleasure. This was going to be a good trip.

After a tearful good-bye to their three children, Jack and Elizabeth walked through the departure flight doors at the airport. They located Air France and exchanged looks, as if to say, *This is actually happening!*

Passports and tickets in hand, they headed to the lounge area that first-class and business-class passengers enjoyed. Here, they drank Veuve Clicquot, a French champagne, and ate scrumptious appetizers that were offered at no cost. Jack loved it. It was worth every penny to be spoiled.

Elizabeth watched her husband drinking his third glass of champagne. "Hon, I know you don't like to fly, but ... be careful, okay?"

He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Don't worry; I'm behaving. I just hate those takeoffs. The French aren't the best drivers either." Jack was trying to lighten the mood.

"I hear that about the Italians too," Elizabeth said.

He smiled and grabbed her hand and then kissed it. She, as always, kissed his hand back. It was a small ritual that they shared.

The flight to Paris went quickly. They disembarked and made a connecting flight to Florence in a commuter plane. The flight was rocky and bumpy. For once, Jack didn't even care. He was so tired from jumping through so many different time zones that he slept the rest of the way. Elizabeth held his hand during the takeoff, smiling and reassuring him all would be well, although she wasn't so sure herself. These pilots were hell-bent on keeping to a schedule, and that made for crappy takeoffs and landings. *Are they late for a funeral or something?* Elizabeth thought.

All that dissipated and was forgotten when they stepped on Italian soil for the first time after safely landing at the Amerigo Vespucci Airport.

It was drizzling. This made it difficult to navigate to the taxi stand area, but Jack managed to get them both there with the luggage.

Their taxi took them onto the main motorway, the A1, that connected Florence with Bologna and Milan in the north and Rome and Naples in the south. This was the same route that the Romans had created in the first century BC.

When they arrived at the Hotel Baglioni right smack-dab in Florence, even the worst of jet lag couldn't douse their spirits. Their suite was beautifully decorated and very inviting. It offered them a unique sense of intimacy and romance. Large windows brought in the twilight from the piazza. There was a four-poster bed with delicately carved posts that any grand duke could delight his mistress in. A fluffy down coverlet, as light as whipped cream, in

pink and gold topped the bed. The fabric on the window treatments was a creamy silk shod with gold thread that swayed easily in the light evening breeze. Jack, ever the stone and marble mason, looked in great admiration at the materials and craftsmanship. The marble had been installed with pride and maintained with care. There was nothing more grand than Italian marble.

"I'm exhausted. Want to snuggle up in that huge bed?" Jack said hopefully.

"Absolutely. I hope I can sleep, though," Elizabeth said.

"I'm sure I can think of something to help you doze off."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes, let's have our first romp on Italian soil," she said.

Elizabeth headed for the bathroom to change. She hesitated at first but then decided to take an Ambien to help her sleep. *It's gonna be a quickie anyway. We're both exhausted.*

After sleeping almost ten hours, Jack and Elizabeth awakened to the soft early-morning sun peeking through the creamy ceiling-to-floor silk drapes. It was a world in daylight they had never seen before.

Elizabeth jumped from bed with excitement and pulled the drapes back to see the view of Florence. Looking upon the piazza below, she witnessed the comings and goings of life in this city. There were people everywhere—buses, Vespas, taxis. A tour director was holding an umbrella up in the air and herding the people in her tour along. While walking slowly backward, the woman spoke into a microphone attached to her jacket lapel and gestured with her umbrella to a cathedral nearby. The tourists followed

enraptured, clicking cameras, nodding to each other, smiling, and posing.

“I can see the central station, hon,” Elizabeth said. “I think that’s where we’re supposed to meet the people from the cooking school this afternoon.”

Elizabeth turned around to see if her husband had fallen back asleep. He hadn’t. “I can’t believe we’re really here,” she said in a dreamy voice.

Jack grinned at her. It was genuinely good to see her happy and excited. They needed this vacation. It was something Elizabeth had talked about for a year. Lately, things had become quite strained between the two of them, and it was refreshing to be in a romantic place such as this. Hopefully the trip would strengthen their marriage.

He thought about how she and the travel agent had planned it down to the finest detail, no expense to be spared—first-class seats on the airplanes, the hotels, the cooking school, Villa Lucia, and the Tauck tour. *I oughta have my head examined*, he thought. *Cooking school? I’d rather have a root canal*. Jack reeled in his thoughts and focused on Elizabeth.

“... so I thought maybe we can have breakfast upstairs on the rooftop restaurant and then head out to the piazza for a little sightseeing before we check out.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. I’m starved!”

“Okay. I’ll go take a shower, unless you need to use the bathroom?” Elizabeth chirped.

“No, it’s all yours.” Jack knew if he didn’t let her use the bathroom first, they’d be eating a lot later.

After getting ready and having breakfast, they headed into the city. In Florence at nine thirty in the morning, the crowds were minimal; it was the best time to sightsee. As they wandered near the church of Santa Maria Novella, Elizabeth suggested they go inside to check it out with underlying intentions. Elizabeth had decided long before they had left the States that she would visit every church she could to light a candle, actually two—one for her marriage and family and the other for clarity on her life’s purpose. Little did she realize that those two intentions would be hugely opposing forces.

As they roamed down the Via Panzani and turned on Via de’ Cerretani, the Duomo shone in the distance, one of Firenze’s most popular tourist attractions. Jack and Elizabeth understood why. It was magnificent. The architect, Filippo Brunelleschi, had won the commission to plan and build the dome after winning a design competition. Work had begun in 1420 and been completed in 1436.

Elizabeth read aloud from the guidebook, “The dome was the world’s largest until the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (Vatican City), which was completed in 1615. The eye-catching facade of the polychrome panels outside are comprised of green, white, and red marble—the colors of the Italian flag.”

“It is incredible,” Jack said. “Can you imagine the intensive sawing and hand cutting it took to make those mosaic tiles?” He was dumbfounded.

They found a bench to sit, just for a little while. The day was getting ahead of them.

“Hey, we better get going,” Jack said. “We have to check out and head over to the train station. Where are we supposed to meet the guy from the cooking school?”

“McDonalds,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

“Seriously? Are they trying to be funny or something?”

“Probably. You dumb Americano!” Elizabeth laughed and tugged at Jack’s hand.

Walking back to the hotel, they noticed the streets filling with tourists and tour guides; sleekly dressed businessmen talking on cell phones; and gorgeous Italian women, always looking chic and sexy. Even the local grandmas wore high heels at the marketplace. Elizabeth dubbed them “the hot Nonnies.”

“It’s getting really crowded. The shops must be opening up again,” Elizabeth noted.

In most parts of Italy, shops and businesses closed down for a siesta every day between noon and four. It was a tradition that nearly all Italians adhered to religiously. Missing the hottest part of the day, eating a large lunch, and napping were the norms. Of course, having sex during that time was a priority too. Elizabeth thought that was a great part of the tradition.

“Remember when we had dinner with my mom just before we left on this trip?” Elizabeth asked.

“Uh, yeah.” Jack wasn’t sure where this was going.

“She said to watch out for pickpockets and gypsies in crowded places, like here.”

“She did, yeah. I’ve got my wallet in my front pants pocket, and I’m keeping an eye on your purse too. We’re fine.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when they spotted a young girl, maybe twelve years old, and an elderly woman with a child of no more than five making a beeline right for them. The young girl was holding an infant over her shoulder with one hand and reaching out to Jack and Elizabeth with her other hand, begging for coins. She came very close to Jack. The elderly women, face wrinkled and brown from exposure to the elements, approached as well, flanked by the small child.

“Per favore, per favore, senora ... Dinero, per favore.” The eldest woman was pulling at Jack’s sleeve, and the girl with the baby was trying to put her arm around Elizabeth, continuously speaking as she did so.

Jack and Elizabeth looked at each other and, not hesitating a moment, ran in different directions.

The gypsies moved on.

Jack spun around to see where his wife had gone, which wasn’t far. She was sitting back at the bench they’d been at before. She waved to him.

“I thought that gypsies in the piazza were a myth!” he said as he walked up. “I can’t believe that happened.”

“I thought my mom was telling stories again. Boy, you sure ran fast.”

“They caught me off guard. Sorry.” Jack gave a sheepish grin.

“Wasn’t sure if you were gonna come back for your old wife.”

“Oh, come on, Elizabeth, I wasn’t that far away from you.”

She smiled. "I know you weren't. Do you think that was a real baby in the girl's arms? Because it sure as hell didn't look like it."

"I don't know. I didn't get a good look. C'mon, we need to get a move on if we're going to be on time." Jack reached for Elizabeth's hand. No strolling this time; their pace was quick as they moved through the piazza.

Giancarlo was a tall, handsome Italian chef. That he happened to speak nearly fluent English was a cherry on top. He and an Australian woman, Anna, met Jack and Elizabeth at the designated McDonald's, right on time.

"*Buongiorno!*" Giancarlo boomed. "Hallo, hallo. Jack? Isabella?"

Jack stepped up with hand extended to the friendly Italian. "Yes, hello, I'm Jack Warren."

"*Sì, sì, buongiorno!* I am Giancarlo. This is Anna, my assistant."

"Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Elizabeth."

"*Sì. Que bella.* Hallo, Elizabeth." Giancarlo grabbed Elizabeth by the shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks.

Elizabeth's face went red. Jack laughed.

With their luggage loaded into the minivan, they were off to Vorno and Villa Lucia.

The Rhode School of Cuisine offered luxury vacations to the gourmet traveler at their many cooking schools. Guests not only learned to prepare, cook, and present traditional dishes but also got to discover the culture and history of the region. Villa Lucia was located in the Tuscan region of Italy, less than five kilometers from Lucca,

the beautiful walled city. The school was comprised of three stone buildings upon a vast countryside estate with panoramic views of the vineyards, olive groves, and wooded foothills, all within the majestic backdrop of the Lucchese mountains.

As they passed through the charming little village of Vorno, Jack and Elizabeth were enchanted by the rustic old farmhouses and grandiose villas, most of which were hidden behind wrought iron gates and centuries-old stone walls. Cypress trees, very popular on most properties, lined the driveways of these estates.

At one point the road became very narrow. Surely, two cars could not pass each other, especially when one side of the street was walled. Elizabeth held her breath, sure that the side mirror was going to be ripped off. She reached for Jack's hand for a squeeze.

"I guess you have to be a talented driver to negotiate these roads," Jack said to Giancarlo.

Giancarlo replied in his heavy accent, "No, not so much. Italians feel that driving is a personal quest. You do what you do to get where you want to go. Not to worry about the other guy. It is his problem." Giancarlo laughed. "In the country, is not difficult. But in Roma, is another thing. I do not recommend for you to drive in Roma, Jack. Okay? Taxi is best way."

"Uh, yeah. That's good advice."

The van slowed as it ascended up a long gravel drive flanked by row after row of olive trees. Then the rows turned into lemon trees, and there it was: Villa Lucia. Gradually, the van swung around a circular driveway, the

gravel crunching underneath the tires. Eventually they came to a halt in front of the wraparound portico. In front of the massive wooden doors at the main entry was a slate floor in blues and grays. Decorative iron hinges supported the doors' weight, and the handles and doorknobs were fashioned into sweet-looking cherubs. The craftsmanship was exquisite.

A guide named Mario greeted Jack and Elizabeth. "*Buongiorno! Buongiorno!* Welcome, senor Warren." Mario shook Jack's hand and kissed him on either cheek.

Elizabeth smiled at Jack's awkwardness. She knew he was trying his best to understand the local customs, even the kissing.

"Senora Warren! *Buongiorno.* Welcome to Villa Lucia. *Il mio nome e Mario. Scusami.* My name is Mario. Welcome!"

"*Buongiorno. Il mio nome e Elizabeth Warren,*" Elizabeth said slowly.

"*Ah, molto benne! Parli italiano?*"

"*Non parlo italiano molto bene.* I am still learning," Elizabeth gushed.

"Very good, senora Warren! You do well." Mario shook her hand as he spoke, then leaned in for a breezy kiss on her cheeks—first on the right, then the left, as the custom dictated.

"Please come in. We have been expecting you." Mario gestured to the front entry as a young man and woman silently appeared from nowhere. The man and woman gathered all the luggage and discreetly waited for their new guests to enter the stone foyer.

“Elena and Carlo will take your baggage to your suite, so we may sit and chat for a bit,” Mario said. “Please follow me to the back gardens. The cherry blossoms are quite lovely this time of year.”

Elizabeth was overwhelmed by the villa’s beauty and charm. It really was like stepping into a dream of antiques, luxury, and history. There were high vaulted ceilings, honey-colored stone on the floors as far as the eye could see, and massive marble fireplaces at each end of the great room. Hand in hand, Jack and Elizabeth followed their guide through the first floor and out the French doors at the south side of the great room. They admired the soft glow of the late-afternoon sun streaming in.

Mario had been humble in his description of the cherry trees. Faint pink petals floated lazily in the air, swirling in the sweet Italian breeze. The trees encircled an immense unpolished marble patio with a large wrought iron table and chairs at the center. Huge pots filled with pink-and-white-striped geraniums surrounded the area. It was magical.

“Please, come and sit, Mr. and Mrs. Warren.” Mario, ever the gracious gentleman, strode over to Elizabeth’s chair and pulled it out for her to sit.

I can certainly get used to this, Elizabeth thought. *Jeez, are all the Italian guys this good-looking? And the way they dress! Tastefully hot and sexy as hell.* Elizabeth had noticed the way Jack had been gawking at the Italian women, catching their eyes. She couldn’t blame him; they were beautiful. Still, seeing him do that chipped at her heart, exacerbating that continual gnawing feeling of dread seeing him desire other women.

As all three sat among the beautiful garden, sipping on a light and crisp pinot grigio, Jack and Elizabeth listened closely. Mario described how their week was to unfold. They would have cooking lessons twice a day, lunch and dinner. Day trips would include a personal tour guide and transportation, all fees inclusive, solely for their group.

"I have a bit of a surprise for you two," Mario continued. "Unfortunately, because of their tour director becoming seriously ill, we have had a cancellation of a group of twelve coming in from England. So the entire villa and staff will be at your disposal—at no extra cost, of course. You will be our only guests this week."

The two new students were speechless.

Jack was the first to respond. "What does that actually mean, Mario? Elizabeth and I will be the only students here?"

"Si, this is true. Because of this, we have a lot of flexibility in our day-trip schedule. Other than Pisa, Florence, Bologna, and Lucca of course, are there any places you wish to visit?"

Elizabeth's mind was reeling with possibilities.

"Yes, I would like to see the marble caves of Carrara," Jack said. "I am a stone, marble, and tile contractor, and I would like to see firsthand the material that I work with so frequently."

Uh, okay. Elizabeth's Milan fantasy went out the window, along with all the clothes, shoes, and bags she had been mentally trying on in her head. *Wait! What do I care? I'm in Italy!* So she smiled her biggest dimple-revealing smile and nodded at the men.

Upon seeing Elizabeth's big smile, Mario said, "*Bene!* So it is agreed then. I will make the arrangements later today. So here are your cookbooks." He handed each of them a spiral binder with the cooking school's emblem on the cover. The binders were loaded with the recipes they were to learn how to prepare with Giancarlo, and behind the recipes section was an itinerary of the day trips.

"We could fit in the trip to Carrara on Tuesday, perhaps Wednesday ... I will let you know," Mario said.

Elizabeth was only partially paying attention to their guide. She was enraptured by her surroundings. This was an enchanting moment in time she would always remember. As if to reinforce her reverie, several petals from the cherry tree dropped right onto the pages of her cookbook. She turned the page and pressed gently on top, praying that the petals would stay there forever.

"*Buona Pasqua!* Happy Easter, senior and senora," Elena said in semi-English.

She placed large plates of delicious breakfast items in front of the villa's new students. Jack's mouth began to water. Among the breakfast items were fluffy scrambled eggs; tiny cubed potatoes, gently browned with fresh garden herbs picked that morning; bacon from Parma; and fresh strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries in their own little glass compote. There were warm, flaky croissants and little cinnamon rolls in a basket, and beside that were the villa's own berry and apricot preserves. Fresh-squeezed orange juice sat in a small carafe beside an early-spring bouquet. Sipping on just-brewed coffee, Jack dove right in.

“*Buona Pasqua, Elena! Il cammello es molto bene,*” Elizabeth said.

Elena smiled. “Senora? *Mi dispiace*, sorry?”

Elizabeth tried again. “*Il cammello es molto bene*; the breakfast looks very good.”

“Ah, *sì*, yes. *Il colazione? Grazia mille.*”

Elena continued to smile as she walked away, too much of a lady to correct the *Americana*.

“I don’t think I said the right thing just now,” Elizabeth said. “God, I hope I didn’t insult her.”

Jack said with a mouthful of bacon, “I wouldn’t worry too much, dear. I’m sure they’re used to people botching up their language all the time.”

“Jack, you’re such a dick sometimes!”

Grabbing her Italian-English dictionary, Elizabeth looked up *colazione*. Okay, it meant “breakfast”; that was what she’d said, wasn’t it? No, she’d said *cammello*. She quickly flipped to that page. “Oh shit! I just said the *camel* was very good!”

“We’re not eating camel, are we? I thought this was bacon.” Jack dropped his fork and laughed. Elizabeth joined in.

“Hey, at least you’re trying ... right?” Jack encouraged.

“Yeah, I really am. Next time, though, I’m gonna look up the phrase first, then speak. The old memory ain’t what she used to be.” Elizabeth shook her head.

“This breakfast is incredible! Why is it that food just tastes better here? I’m gonna be as big as this villa by the time we finish the week,” Jack said between bites.

Elizabeth just nodded. *Why is it that I have to watch almost every goddamn morsel that goes in my mouth*

while he scarfs huge amounts of calories and not care less if he gains a few pounds? It's just not fair. Looking off into the distance, she quietly ate her berries and promised herself, *In my next lifetime ... I might just come back as a man!*

Giancarlo began their lessons the same way each time—with a huge smile and a starched white chef's smock tied about his waist and a tall white toque on top of his head. He was tall, dark, and handsome, and his Italian accent was sexy and charming. This made Elizabeth especially attentive and a model student, willing to try any disgusting technique or eat some unsavory dish she would never consider eating at home in the States.

Jack leaned over and said, "You're such a kiss-ass."

Having learned some of the Italian hand gestures, Elizabeth placed the tip of her right hand under her chin and flicked it outward toward Jack.

Giancarlo caught sight of this and said, "No fighting, okay? We cook."

Jack said under his breath, so that only Elizabeth could hear, "Since I was forced to come to cooking school in Italy, I might as well enjoy the wine." He drank deeply from his wineglass.

Elizabeth gave him a steely look. She thought he'd probably drink all the wine in Italy if he could.

Over several days, they had both become very good students. How could one not? They worked in a gargantuan kitchen with a working fireplace at one end of the room. The recently overhauled and updated kitchen was state

of the art with Carrara-marble countertops for baking and pasta making; butcher-block tables for chopping, slicing, and cutting; and stainless steel countertops for cleaning meat, fish, and poultry. All the stainless appliances were either new or less than a year old. It was a cooking student's dream.

Sunday they prepared all sorts of *pasta fresca* (fresh pasta) and stuffed ravioli, tortellini, and gnocchi with *pomodoro* sauces, pesto sauces, and light white sauces. They made *pasta e fagioli* (thick bean soup), caramelized roasted duck breast with vin santo sauce on a bed of fluffy potatoes and dressed with rocket (arugula), and *crostata al limone* (lemon tart). Every day both meals, lunch and dinner, were comprised of three to five courses. They prepared their meals with Giancarlo's guidance.

They had a break to rest and then headed back to the dining room to enjoy the fruits of their labor. It was just the two of them in the immense dining room, with the fireplace lit for dinner and fresh flowers and candles at the table. Several selections of wine to accommodate each course were recommended and waiting at a carved wooden sideboard.

It was a great deal to absorb and definitely wasn't for tourists looking for a restful vacation. Jack and Elizabeth were having the time of their lives. The staff were attentive and charming, discreetly moving about the villa so as to not interfere with their guests.

Some days they lunched on an antipasto misto with a selection of Italian salamis and prosciutto; layered tomatoes, mozzarella, and fresh basil; lasagnette al pesto;

porchetta (roasted pork); and *patate al latte* and grilled vegetables. They also had *insalata mista* (mixed green salad), *fromaggi misti* (mixed cheese platter), apple tart, and *frutta*. They made pizza with fresh dough, red sauce made from scratch, and the best mozzarella cheese to be found in the market and baked it in the old pizza/bread oven that had been at the villa for centuries.

Dinners were another mouth-watering adventure contributing to their expanding waistlines. They made herb-encrusted filet of sea bass, white wine risotto, and *fiori di zucca* (gently fried zucchini flowers); Tuscan-style roasted rack of lamb with herbs in a Chianti sauce and garlic cream; and *patate sabbiose* (potatoes with truffle and shaved parmesan).

All meals were served with an *ensalta mista* and cheese plate before the dessert. The parade of desserts, both after lunch and dinner, was remarkable: *cantucci con vin santo* (Italian biscuits with vin santo wine), *gelato alla vaniglia* (homemade vanilla ice cream), vanilla custards, tiramisu, tarts of assorted fruit flavors, biscotti (traditional hard cookies made with nuts and dipped in chocolate), *limone sorbet* (homemade Meyer-lemon sorbet), and one of Giancarlo's specialties, chocolate heart cake with a vanilla sauce (chocolate cake with warm chocolate inside the cake, vanilla sauce, and a dollop of freshly whipped cream).

One lesson was solely dedicated to wine tasting and pairing wines to various foods. That was Jack's favorite lesson.

The day trips were spent with expert guides. Some were teachers at the university, and others were professional

tour directors. They spoke excellent English and were informative, greatly entertaining Jack and Elizabeth with stories about the local history and customs. They visited the walled city of Lucca, Pisa (the tower really did lean), Bologna, and the Carrara marble caves that had been excavated for centuries. That particular day was a literal roller-coaster ride. Mario had hired a man named Alessandro to drive them in his jeep to the marble caves. His “jeep” was a tiny 4x4 Suzuki. The fact that three large men and a woman could all fit in this tiny vehicle was a miracle in itself. Jack and Mario sat in the back. Elizabeth, in the front with the windshield in her face, said her prayers. As they drove on the autostrada, they began to notice huge marble blocks on the back of flatbed trucks everywhere. Jack estimated thirty tons or more. The temperature dropped as they approached the magnificent Apua Mountains. At first glance, the mountains looked nearly covered in snow, but this was an illusion—it was not snow but marble.

They descended through a quarry gate and were waved through. Mario mentioned that most of the caves, the areas quarried, were inherited, kept in families for hundreds of years. The land was bought, then quarried or cut. A few times the little group stopped and got out to see the huge machinery that drilled the mountainside. Massive caves had been cut into blocks over the centuries. Mario said that many famous sculptors would come to visit the caves and purchase the blocks for their next projects. Legend had it that Michelangelo himself had come to these very caves to choose his blocks. He had

said that the blocks spoke to him, telling him the images that needed to be released from the constraints of the blocks. The most famous of his sculptures was *David*, the seventeen-foot statue of a standing male nude, sculptured between 1501 and 1504 and representing the biblical hero. It was a true masterpiece that still stood today at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence.

The little Suzuki 4x4 steadily made its way up the very narrow dirt road. Alessandro drove way too fast for Elizabeth's liking. Barely keeping two hands on the wheel, he drove like a typical Italian, jockeying for limited space on the road.

Up and up they continued. Massive blocks of marble were used as guardrails for this dirt track called a road. Large trucks tried to pass at the turns. Elizabeth was terrified and looked it, with one hand on the door handle and the other bracing herself on the dashboard. She implored blessed Mary to protect them. At five thousand feet up from where they'd passed the gate, the rain turned into a slushy brown mess that the windshield wipers were no match for. Even Mario became quiet.

Terrified of looking down and nearly having her first anxiety attack, Elizabeth looked over in horror as Alessandro answered his cell phone. He stopped the car, continued to speak in rapid Italian, and then, with one hand free, turned the car around. "So we ready to head down now?" he asked, as if they possibly wanted to continue farther up.

Elizabeth decided to light extra candles at the next church she entered.

All in all, the trip was a whirlwind of excitement. Most importantly, though, it rekindled the love that Jack and Elizabeth shared. They were able to leave their day-to-day life behind and embrace the romance Italy had to offer. Elizabeth was forever trying to find time to write in her travel journal, wanting to make sure she never forgot the emotions, the memories, and her reflections on all that they had experienced.

The evening before the Warrens left Villa Lucia, Giancarlo gave his final lesson. Elizabeth was deeply touched when he opened his leather case and took out his small and very well-worn recipe book. All good cooks had such a book, and they usually were full of well-guarded secrets.

“Liz, I would like to share some *importante* recipes from my grandmother’s *ricetta* book, her recipe book. I do not *ever* share these *secrets*, to no one. Okay? These our *segretos* now.”

Elizabeth leaped off her seat in the kitchen, face as red as a beet, and embraced her talented, sexy cooking teacher. She gave him a kiss on the left cheek, then the right. Giancarlo laughed at his only female student for the week as she raced back to her seat to gather her pen and notebook.

As she began to write every word he spoke, she thought this was a gift from not only his grandmother but the generations that had preceded her. In the beginning of the week, Giancarlo had stuck to the cooking-school recipes, but as the week had progressed, he’d given out personal cooking tips here and there. He understood

that Elizabeth appreciated *and* wrote down everything he said.

“Wait a minute! *Uno memento!* Hey, I thought *I* was your best student!” Jack blurted with a huge smile on his face and a large glass of local Chianti in his hand. He watched his wife writing rapidly in her filled notebook. He had maybe a page or two written down.

“Ah, Giacomo, Jack, you are very good student, *molto bene* ... just not as beautiful as your wife.”

Both men laughed.

“We will let Elena and Carlos finish in here while you two dress for dinner. In *uno hora*. Okay?”

Jack and Elizabeth agreed and went to get ready. All dressed up and ready for their final night, they descended the steps to enjoy their final dinner. A champagne ceremony was held in their honor, and they both received official cooking-school certificates. Mario snapped pictures of all that were there. The recent graduates beamed. Gifts were exchanged. Elizabeth received a twenty-year-old bottle of balsamic vinegar with no *caramello*, no fake coloring, and Jack was delighted to get a local bottle of olive oil pressed from the villa’s own olives. Elizabeth handed out locally made cards to Giancarlo, Mario, and some of the staff. In each, she had written a special note in her best Italian and tucked in some euros in gratitude.

Giancarlo and the staff members excused themselves and returned to the kitchen. Mario sat with Jack and Elizabeth in front of the great room fireplace. The table was decorated with the villa’s finest china and crystal. A

fragrant bouquet of red, white, and pink roses sat in the middle of the table, and silver candlesticks held locally made candles.

The entire meal was fabulous, as were the wines that accompanied each course. After the plates had been taken away and the last of the wine had been finished, the conversation lulled. Ever the gentleman, Mario excused himself and said goodnight to allow the couple some privacy on their last night.

Staying up into the wee hours, Jack and Elizabeth sat in front of the fireplace quietly talking about their week at Villa Lucia and of the Italian adventures still ahead.

Jack and Elizabeth boarded a train in Florence bound for Venezia (Venice). They watched the countryside roll by as they sat in their first-class seats.

Elizabeth wrote in her journal, catching up on the last few days of their stay at the villa. Every once in a while, she'd look over at her husband. He had been asleep for just a little while. She thought that he really had been a good sport through their travels, not showing his frustrations very often at the customs, the ridiculous prices, or the men making comments about his *bella* wife. His friendly demeanor usually championed him through. But he wasn't enjoying the fact that he couldn't speak the language. He knew this put him at a disadvantage, and it frustrated him, which often put a strain between the two of them.

Elizabeth was hoping that the next leg of their journey, a Tauck tour through other regions of Italy, would create

a larger comfort zone. They'd be with fellow English-speaking travelers. Plus Jack enjoyed the company of others guys who wanted to sit, have a beer, and bullshit for a while.

Their first stop was Venice, then Florence again, Sienna, Rome, and lastly the Vatican.

As Jack and Elizabeth's water taxi navigated the small canals, they passed other small boats filled with people, floating grocery stores, and floating restaurants. Their driver turned onto the Canal Grande (Grand Canal). With great flourish, the boatman pulled alongside the large dock in front of the Westin Europa & Regina. The eighteenth-century grand hotel glowed in the late-afternoon sun. It was magnificent, representing all the fantasies that Elizabeth had imagined Venice would contain. Once inside, they were overwhelmed by the beauty of the precious marble, elegant damasks, and antiques everywhere they looked.

Jack and Elizabeth were escorted to their suite. It was unparalleled to anything they had ever stayed in, elegant and cozy all at the same time. As Elizabeth headed to the sliding glass doors and the view that lay beyond, she stopped in front of the flat-screen TV. "Jack! Oh my God! Look at this!" she said. The TV was on, playing a soft Italian concerto in the background. Upon the screen was a message that read, "The manager of the Westin Europa & Regina Venice would like to welcome Mr. Jack Warren and Mrs. Elizabeth Warren."

"That is awesome!" Jack was stunned.

“Is that champagne!” Elizabeth screeched.

“I like this place. It’s like being in a fairy tale.” Jack laughed as he plucked the cold bottle from the ice bucket and popped the cork.

“I can’t believe this,” Elizabeth whispered as she headed to the sliding doors once more. In one grand gesture, she flung the sheer, silky drapes aside and then opened the sliding door after that. She stepped out on one of their little balconies and held on to the wrought iron railing. It was a breathtaking view. Both of their little balconies were right above the Grand Canal. Elizabeth began to weep. In her heart, she said a prayer of gratitude, tears streaming down her face as she watched the beauty of the Venetian world pass underneath her. Jack was right; it was a fairy tale.

“What’s wrong? Elizabeth? Are you crying?” Jack was alarmed to see his wife in such a state. Usually she was bouncing up and down and smiling from ear to ear. “Here, hon, why don’t you have a nice glass of free champagne from the hotel manager?” Jack was trying to soothe and be silly all at the same time.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I’m just absolutely blown away by all of this. Everything. I could never have imagined such ... perfection. The architecture, the canal, the boats all darting around like bees.” She was wiping away tears and grinning simultaneously.

Jack placed an arm around his wife. She had always been very sensitive, a total romantic, a quality that he fell for every time. Her sensitivity was one of her special qualities, and he deeply loved her for it.

Early that evening, Jack and Elizabeth met their tour director and group in the hotel lobby at the Tauck-tour cocktail reception. There were introductions all around. Jack was elated to hear his native tongue spoken, even if it had a Texan twang or a New England nasally pitch.

Everyone in the group received the itinerary for the remainder of the tour. (Jack and Elizabeth had missed the first part, Milan and Lake Lugano and then Lake Como and Bellagio in Switzerland, as they had still been at Villa Lucia.)

The remainder of the trip would be exciting but very busy, not like the easy pace of the cooking school in Vorno, but Jack and Elizabeth were up for whatever excitement was to come.

They stayed in Venice for a couple of days, took the railways back to Florence, and then traveled to Siena and Rome. Finally, they were on their way to what Elizabeth had been waiting for, the Vatican.

With everyone sitting on an air-conditioned bus, the handsome, thirtyish tour director said, "I hope everyone has been having a good time!"

There were shouts here and there up and down the aisles.

"No trip to Italy would be complete without a visit to the Vatican," the tour director said, eliciting more shouts and cheers. "As we maneuver through the Roman streets here, I'd like to tell you a bit about what we are going to see. The Vatican is a state and city all in one, a walled enclave within the city of Rome. It's approximately a hundred and ten acres and is considered the smallest international

state in the world.” He continued on, describing the infinite works of world-renowned artwork to be seen on the tour, including the Sistine Chapel.

As the group filed out of the tour bus and onto the Vatican grounds, Paolo, the tour guide, said he had a special treat for the group. “We will start with the Sistine Chapel as our first leg of the tour,” he said.

As she and Jack made their way through the throngs of people, keeping an eye on the tour guide so as not to get lost, Elizabeth reached within her handbag, unzipped the side compartment, and grasped her Nonnie’s crystal rosary beads. At last, the crystals had made their way back to Rome, via Elizabeth’s hands. She clutched them in one hand and held Jack’s hand in the other.

Upon crossing the threshold of the Sistine Chapel’s entrance, Elizabeth stood still. Straight ahead was the view of the entrance wall, the north and south walls, and of course, above the altar, was the magnificent *Last Judgment*—the stories of Christ from beginning to end all within this sacred space. Elizabeth was breathless. It was almost too much for the eyes to take in. It was overwhelmingly stunning. At first, she felt a sense of peace, as if she had come home to a familiar place, one that held love and understanding for her alone. It was one of those moments in life when time stopped and stood still. All of her sensations were heightened. Voices were muffled. It was a moment in time, in all of time, that would permanently be etched into eternity—a moment of pure pleasure, pure delight, and perfect harmony with all that was.

Elizabeth had been taught that as she grew deeper into her spiritual awakening, she would experience times like these. She was startled by a blaze of warmth through the top of her head, a blast of energy that whooshed through her body. She was electrified. Her entire body was light. She could feel light rush through her fingertips. Her hair stood erect all over her body, and goose bumps covered her skin. It was peace. It was love. It was a download—a very rare rush of divine energy. Then it was gone, just as quickly as it had come.

Earlier, Elizabeth had had a headache all morning, and now she understood why. Emily had explained about the headaches, the dull aching at the top of the head as the head expanded to allow more energy into the body, the crown chakra. The headache was in preparation for the download. A deep sense of calm soothed Elizabeth. She looked around at all the other tourists milling about. No one seemed to notice her. No one yelled out, “Hey, are you all right? Everything okay?” Nothing was different; everything was the same. Except Elizabeth. She could still feel the crystal rosary beads in her hand, still feel her feet on the ground.

Jack was moving toward her. He had a smile on his face. “Hey, I was looking for you. Got lost in a throng of people?”

“No, just got caught up in the frescos. God, they are sublime. Seeing this for the first time, well, it’s as though I’m walking beside these people,” she gushed, nodding up at the ceiling, “participating in their lives, witnessing firsthand the stories of Genesis—from the creation ... to the fall of man.”

Jack looked deeply into her eyes; they were sparkling and filled with joy. "You look very happy, wife. All this religious stuff gets you excited, I can see."

"I hope someday you'll understand how important all this religious stuff is to me," she said.

"Well, as long as you don't turn into one of those wackos, like a psychic or medium or whatever they're called. They charge money to tell innocent people lies! They're con artists." He rolled his eyes as he spoke.

Elizabeth knew all too well what Jack thought about intuitives. Her happy mood began to evaporate. "Rest assured, I'll never be a con artist. Bad karma, right?" Elizabeth smirked.

Jack smiled, placed his arm around his wife, and said, "I know you're not like that, not my good little Catholic schoolgirl."

The last stop that day was at one of the two official Vatican shops. All the items inside the shops had been blessed by the Pope, John Paul II.

Browsing the jewelry cases, Elizabeth stopped to peer at the crucifixes. One in particular dazzled her. The draw of its energy pulled her. Although there were hundreds of crosses on display, this one was meant for her. It was about two inches in length, made of gold, and encrusted with garnet stones. Mesmerized, Elizabeth pointed and asked, "May I see that one, *per favore*?"

The saleswoman drew the velvet-clad jewelry box from the glass case and placed it in front of Elizabeth. As Elizabeth gently placed the blessed crucifix into her

palm, she felt a familiar blast of energy emanating from the beautiful object.

“Lo vorrei come questo. I would like this one. Per favore.”

Carrying all her purchases—some for family, others for friends, and of course the new beloved cross—Elizabeth met up with Jack and the rest of the group just outside the shops.

It was time to leave.

One of their fellow travelers snapped a final picture of Jack and Elizabeth standing arm in arm, bright smiles upon their faces, in St. Peter’s Square. It was the last picture taken of them in Italy and the last picture taken before their lives changed forever.

Chapter 5

Emily, who was driving, and Elizabeth were headed down the coastal highway, heading south to Carmel. They had left early that morning. The car headlights were still on, shining away the shadows on the road.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, both driver and passenger appreciated the beauty of the Pacific Ocean on the right and the lush green fields dotted with wildflowers on their left.

After driving in silence for a while, Emily said, “The first place is in Carmel on Seventeen-Mile Drive. It sounds like a mansion the way it was described. The second is in Carmel Valley; I think it’s a condo or townhouse. The last is a cottage on the last part of Seventeen-Mile Drive. The owner said we’ll be driving a circuitous route; takes less time.”

Elizabeth said, “Okay, sounds good.” She looked out the window at the expanse of the ocean and sent up a prayer of protection and strength. Emily had been hired to clear, or remove, the negative energy from three houses owned by the same couple. The owners were very wealthy and wanted all three cleared in one day. No expense was to be spared.

As they reached the first one, it was clear the house hadn't been lived in for some time. It must have been beautiful at one time, here on Seventeen-Mile Drive in Carmel, California. It was a mansion really, owned by an alcoholic grandson from a well-known banking family that had been very powerful in San Francisco up until the mid-1980s. The house was spectacular! The Spanish-style home, very popular in Southern California, had been built to impress and to stand the test of time. Imported tile from Italy and Spain had been hand-painted and painstakingly installed. An ornate fountain stood in the entryway, but it was filled with dried bugs and green mold, and a chunk was missing from the bottom of it, as if something had smashed into it and left the remnants for someone else to clean up. Black wrought iron railings ran up and down the staircases; paint was chipped in some spots and faded in others.

Emily looked up above, then pointed. "Look at the size of that alabaster light fixture. How many men do you think it took to get that up there?"

Elizabeth shook her head. It probably had taken at least four or five. The fixture was the size of a small Volkswagen.

Dolores, the woman who had hired Emily for the clearings, was in her late forties. She was slim and had a close-cropped black bob. She was dressed with a casual, elegant air—light wool slacks and a cream-colored cashmere sweater. She wore lustrous pearls discreetly at the throat, and a gargantuan yellow diamond sparkled off her left ring finger.

“Perry, my husband, is out of town for the week,” she said as they walked through the foyer. “I thought it would be a good time for you to come.”

“Would your husband be upset if he knew we were here?” Emily asked.

“My husband gets upset at everything. He’s drunk most days. He’s always upset at something. I’m thinking of leaving him—this time ... for good.” Dolores looked very sad as she spoke. “I have to think of my daughter. She’ll be starting her second year of high school soon. She can’t handle even being in the same room with her father anymore. It’s been unbearable.”

Emily and Elizabeth looked at each other knowing that was an understatement. The dark energy was arresting, pressing on them. The chill in the air gave Elizabeth goose bumps even though it was eighty degrees outside. Although no one had lived in the house for some time, the harsh energy had stayed, hovering in the dark corners of the cathedral ceilings, hiding inside the grandiose antiques, waiting inside the cold walk-in closets. *How could a family live under circumstances like these?* Elizabeth wondered.

Emily said to Dolores, “When we spoke on the phone previously, I mentioned how we go about clearing the house room by room. A house this size can take up to a couple of hours, maybe more. It depends what we find. Right now I’m picking up a lot of hostile energy. They’re waiting for us. A good portion of the negative energy is coming from over there.” Emily pointed down a large hallway.

“Who’s waiting?” Dolores squeaked.

Emily said, “The shadow figures and another spirit, maybe more.”

Dolores grabbed at her pearls as if they were a talisman.

“Don’t worry, Dolores; we’ll get rid of them,” Emily said. “Shadow figures are the undead. They can touch humans in a physical way—pushing, kicking, poking, really anything. They straddle the physical earthly realm but also the spiritual realm. They do it because it’s familiar. They were once in a physical body and want revenge because they’re not alive anymore.”

Elizabeth turned to Dolores and piped in, “So the spirits that hang around and haunt stay because they’re afraid to crossover. Either they don’t want to leave the physical plane, leave their loved ones or whatever, or they’re afraid to meet their maker. Maybe they did something horrible in their life and they’re afraid to be judged. Once they cross, they don’t come back.”

Emily said, “Right. Exactly right. The shadow figures are a demonic presence and can dart back and forth from the physical plane to the spiritual one.”

Dolores said, “Oh my God, please get rid of them.”

Pointing to the left wing of the house, Emily asked, “Are there bedrooms down that way? I’m being told now that someone was murdered in one of them.”

The two other women’s eyes were as wide as saucers.

“How could you possibly know that? I never mentioned anything to you about that on the phone,” Dolores stammered.

Emily said, “The General says it’s about time you did something for the good of the house. All you do is shop! Sorry, Dolores—those are his words, not mine.”

“The General! My God. That’s what Perry’s family called his grandfather. He’s been dead for years now. How could ...” She stopped talking and stared at Emily and then at Elizabeth. “Yes, there was a death here. The police never declared it a murder, and there was never an arrest. Unresolved, I believe they said, but the case was never officially closed.” Dolores continued, “It was a family tragedy. Perry only mentioned it to me a couple of times when we were first married. It was how the General’s wife, Gloria, died. She was strangled to death in her own bedroom on New Year’s Eve, right down that hall.” She pointed in the same direction Emily had pointed just moments ago.

A little chill ran down Elizabeth’s spine. Internally she kept repeating a protection prayer to archangel Michael.

“Dolores, Elizabeth and I would like to walk around the house unaccompanied, with your permission of course.”

Dolores hesitated for a brief moment, then nodded and said, “Sure, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

Emily turned to Elizabeth and smiled. “C’mon, let’s get to work! The General contacted me as soon as we arrived—his spirit is loud and overbearing. I’ve been ignoring him, up until now.”

Trying not to look like a coward, Elizabeth smiled back and followed her teacher down the hall.

The house faced west, toward the ocean, and almost every room showcased the mesmerizing view. As they walked along the parquet hardwood floors, Elizabeth examined the faded hand-painted wallpaper that had probably been vibrant and colorful at one time. She knew

she was just trying to distract herself from what crazy shit lay ahead.

“Tell me what you’re sensing right now,” Emily said. “What are you getting?”

“Nervous?” Elizabeth said sheepishly.

Emily stopped in her tracks. “Elizabeth, don’t be. I know this is only your second time clearing a house with me, but it’s good practice. You did great at that house in San Gregorio! That was only a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Elizabeth shrugged.

Emily said, “You were able to locate where the negative energy was, clear it with archangel Michael’s help, and identify that there was a spirit present there. Then I convinced the previous owner—dead ... what, forty years?—to leave and head to the light. We did a great job working together. The owners are overjoyed! Their son doesn’t see the spirit anymore; he’s gone.”

Emily continued, “Okay, so I need you to focus now. Take some deep breaths. Open yourself up to the divine spirit; open your channels.”

Elizabeth did as she was told. Closing her eyes, she took a couple of deep breaths and exhaled slowly. “I feel a lot of sadness, like my heart is very heavy with loneliness. I can see what looks like red eyes in the far distance.”

“Good, very good. Keep going,” Emily said.

“I feel anger too. No, wait ... it’s more like betrayal.”

“That’s what I’m getting. Good job, Elizabeth.”

Both teacher and student walked into the massive master bedroom and stood right inside the doorway. Elizabeth watched as Emily swept the room with her eyes

and then looked back at Elizabeth. With all her senses alerted, Emily said she could feel the attacks being thrown in their direction. The air became frigid cold, and the hairs on their necks stood on end, as did the goose bumps on their arms.

“Liz, don’t get distracted. We’re protected. Can you see a white aura around me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You have the divine white light around you as well. We’re good to get started.”

As they faced the room, they both could see the dark entity, a transparent, shadowy black figure of the demonic realm flitting about the room, red eyes and all. This was not the General.

“Elizabeth, maybe check out the bathroom; see if you feel anything in there.”

“Ah, okay.”

Oh, God, it’s so cold in here, she thought as she headed to the small hallway that led to the bathroom, Elizabeth turned the corner and stopped dead in her tracks. She felt as if she’d slammed into a wall of ice. Standing there dumbstruck, she could see the bathroom only a few feet away, but her feet would not move, could not move. *This is ridiculous! I’m going in that bathroom!*

Her thoughts had barely processed in her mind when she felt icy fingers around her neck, squeezing ... squeezing. Her eyes watered. No breath could escape her. She couldn’t form any words to cry for help. And yet no one was there—not anyone with a physical body, anyhow.

“Elizabeth? E ... liz ... a ... beth?” Emily’s voice was barely audible and seemed so very far away to Elizabeth.

When Emily did not hear a response, she headed over to the bathroom and witnessed what she had feared—her student under attack.

The dark entity with piercing red eyes had Elizabeth by the throat. The being took one look at Emily, shrunk itself, and slithered away, for shadow beings could not exist in the blazing light that emanated from a very experienced healer. Like water on a flame.

“Elizabeth, listen to me now. You are all right. It’s gone, and it won’t be back. I promise!”

Elizabeth was paralyzed with fear. Thoughts raced through her mind. *This very well might be too much for me to handle!* It was a moment of truth, right here and right now. Should she continue to learn to become an energetic healer? Could she cope? Or should she bolt, run the hell out of there, and forget about this whole chapter of her life?

“Elizabeth, are you all right?” Emily asked. “That happens sometimes when you’re not careful about your protection prayers. Clear yourself now, and ask archangel Michael to remove any low or dark energies from you, especially any attaching entities.”

Finally, Elizabeth regained her voice. “Oh my God! What? What am I supposed to do? What the *hell* just happened?” she sputtered. She became squirrely again, just as Emily always said she shouldn’t do.

“Archangel Michael, please come by my side,” Emily said. “Surround Elizabeth with divine white light. Remove

all darkness, all dark energies ...” Emily continued to recite the prayer and quickly finished.

Then Emily said, “I know it’s pretty frightening to get attacked by a pissed-off entity. Did you get distracted? You can’t get squirrely, Liz.”

“I know, I know. I freaked out. It was like I didn’t have any control over myself! I was frozen. It was terrifying!” Elizabeth said wide-eyed, rubbing her throat where it had been squeezed.

“One vital lesson you’ve just learned: never allow fear to creep inside of your thoughts during a clearing. Demons can see your fear and will use it against you. These kind of shadow figures reach into people’s minds and play with their fears and desires, greatly manipulating them. They can activate fear and anger to make people on the human plane react. I’ve witnessed this over and over for years.” Emily spoke with conviction.

Elizabeth nodded as she looked at the spot where she had been strangled.

“C’mom,” Emily said. “We’ll stay together. Let’s finish this room.”

Elizabeth pointed to a cluster of black dots in one of the corners in the room. It was negative energy. “Can you see that, Em?”

“Yes. That should be cleared.”

Emily walked across the room and stopped just below the dark cluster. She raised her arms high above her head, palms facing outward toward the corner of the ceiling. Then, seeing through her third eye, she focused on the cluster and said, “I ask to be raised to the highest

level of consciousness and understanding. I call upon the ascended masters for guidance and wisdom for healing and clearing purposes only. Jesus, Mary, Buddha, Shiva, Sita, Ram ... I ask that the living God be present. I call upon my angels and guides. Archangel Michael, please come and surround this room with divine white light. Remove from this room any darkness and dark entities and any attaching negative energies. I ask that these be removed and taken to the land of nothingness ...” She began to move her hands, palms facing each other as though she were holding a basketball—squeezing, circling, rotating. A flash of energetic white light coursed through her hands as she annihilated the black dots hovering in the corner.

The corner was clear, not a trace of anything. Done.

Emily turned toward Elizabeth and said, “That was easy. Let’s head to the next room. Tell me when you see or feel anything dark or negative. You need the practice. Plus it’s always good to have another pair of eyes looking. This is a big place.”

“Okay, sure. I’ve got your back, Em.”

“Good. Let’s continue room to room. We’ll save the General for last. He’s getting loud and wants attention.”

Blasting through shadow figures and clusters of blackness, they made their way to the last room, the living room. Emily called out to the General. He startled her when he came up from behind. She felt the cold air on her neck.

Elizabeth sat down on the couch. She could not see or hear him but could sense his presence. What she could hear was Emily talking, a one-sided conversation.

“My name is Emily Gordon. I’m a medium and energy healer. This is Elizabeth, my student. We’ve been called to come here and find out why you’re haunting the place.”

Emily listened, shook her head, and relayed the answer to Elizabeth. “He says this is his home; he will not leave it.”

Elizabeth looked around the room for traces of him. Nothing.

Emily closed her eyes, and Elizabeth knew she was looking at the movie of his past in her third eye. Emily paused for a moment and then spoke to what looked like the center of the room. “I can see you were a very handsome man at one time, flirting with all the ladies at your house parties here. Uh-oh, your wife didn’t appreciate that. Oh, and you had several affairs in this house. You were quite the partier too.”

Emily listened a moment and then said, “No, I don’t want a cocktail; I don’t drink. Look, let’s work together to get you to the light, so you can leave. There’s nothing for you here, General, but darkness.”

Emily confronted the General about his needing to go to the other side. He was fearful because of the way he’d lived his life—his drinking, his womanizing, and the murkiness surrounding his wife’s death. He didn’t admit killing her, but he wouldn’t answer when Emily asked if he knew who did. No wonder there was such a strong demonic presence in the house. Murders brought out the dark world. The General was a restless soul and would be bound to that house forever, stuck—unless he agreed to walk toward the light that Emily called upon. He knew he would be judged by those who do that, but he wanted

out, no matter the outcome. He moved toward the light and disappeared.

The second house, a townhouse in Carmel Valley, was in a small gated community, the type that required association fees for its outdoor upkeep. The townhouse was nicely maintained on the outside, but once they stepped inside, it was another matter.

The townhouse had two floors, but the rooms were on the modest side. It was surprising that Perry “lived” there full-time. The place was sparsely furnished and messy. Pizza boxes littered the floor. There were empty bottles of vodka on the beat-up coffee table, and a blanket had been thrown carelessly on the floor near the couch. The place had the distinct odor of vomit.

Dolores said, “My husband and I are separated. He lives here when he’s not at his girlfriend’s.”

“Girlfriend?” Elizabeth said.

“I don’t even care anymore. I just want to divorce and sell these places and move on with my daughter. I figured the clearings would help that process.”

“They will. Most people feel the negative energy circulating around them, even when they can’t articulate what *it* is,” Emily explained.

“I can wait outside on the patio if you like,” Dolores said.

“Yes, that’s fine. We’ll let you know when we’re done.” Elizabeth smiled as she spoke.

She and Emily worked quickly and thoroughly. Because Perry didn’t seem to spend much time here either,

the townhouse was easy to clear. When people spent significant time in a space, be it a home, office, school, or so on, the negative energy built up over time, kind of like a heavy sense of dread that permeated throughout the space. You couldn't see it, but you would sense it.

The third house still needed to be cleared, and daylight was beginning to fade.

As the three women pulled up in front of the third house, Emily and Elizabeth exchanged relieved looks. The place was perched on the edge of the bluff, also on Seventeen-Mile Drive, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was an enchanted English Tudor, complete with a small formal garden. Pale-pink and white cabbage roses ensconced the mullioned windows in the front of the house. Small stone benches had been placed here and there at intimate corners of the property. One would almost expect to see fairies hiding behind the yellow tulips. As they slowly made their way down the brick path, Elizabeth could hear the delicate tinkling of a fountain nearby. As they approached the front door, a sweet little cherub fountain came into view. The cherub was standing upright, looking over his shoulder. One hand held his penis as the water trickled from it into the fountain base.

Emily shot Elizabeth a look, then rolled her eyes. As Dolores walked ahead, reaching for her front-door keys, Elizabeth whispered, "Do you think he has prostate problems? He's probably been doing that for years."

Emily flashed a smile, then shook her head.

Dolores swung open the front door and led them into a small foyer filled with antiques and fresh flowers. The

energy emanating from the house was light, almost at the other end of the spectrum from the first house they'd visited.

Dolores asked, "What is your feeling about this house?" She eyed the two other women.

"I think it's a beautiful home," Emily exclaimed, "although it does harbor a bit of sadness. Nothing we can't dissipate and remove, though."

Elizabeth nodded in agreement.

"Good. I'll be in the back gardens," Dolores said. "I have a phone call to make. Excuse me, then." Dolores walked down the hardwood floor that led to the kitchen.

Once she had left, Elizabeth said, "Where can I get one of those fountains? I could give it to Jack for his birthday!" She and Emily both laughed.

"C'mon, girl, let's wrap this up. I think we should head upstairs first. I'm getting a pull from up there."

"Yeah, I felt that too."

"My guess is that it's her bedroom—lots of tears shed in there I bet. Poor thing. I can only imagine how hard it is being married to an alcoholic."

Elizabeth followed her teacher up the plush carpeted stairs. She thought, *It really is true: money can't buy you happiness. It never will.*

The ride on the way back was in the dark.

"You did great, Elizabeth. I know it was a little frightening at the first house. You made it through just fine."

"Oh, yeah, sure! I almost peed in my pants!"

Emily chuckled. "Somehow, trying to explain that kind of experience gets lost in translation. It's part of your

training. I'm sure after this, you'll be exceedingly careful with your protection prayers. They're vital."

"It won't happen again. That's for sure. I was sloppy and squirrely because I went out last night and had a few drinks." Elizabeth shook her head.

"Well, now you know." Emily was kind enough to end it there.

Looking out the window, Elizabeth recalled all the events of the day. Overall, it had been one of the most terrifying but incredibly exciting days she had ever experienced.

They had about forty-five minutes to go, and Elizabeth was becoming more and more anxious. She knew she'd better be convincing when she told her story about her whereabouts today. Leaving early in the morning and coming home past dinner wasn't something Elizabeth usually did.

"You okay?" Emily asked. "You're awful quiet for someone who had such a big day."

"Yeah, I guess. I was thinking about Jack. I told him I was going to a public meditation with you today—you know, with Shri Ma."

"What?"

A short silence ensued.

"Elizabeth, I think it's great that you are opening up a little bit more to Jack. Being an energy healer isn't something you can hide. It's a part of who you are now. You are turning out to be an incredible healer! But you cannot help others if you don't tell them what you do."

"I know, I know! It's easy when I'm around you! But when I'm not, my face turns red, and my resolve weakens. Then

I just feel as though I'm not communicating effectively. It's fear! Just plain old fear. I know I shouldn't think that way. It shouldn't matter what other people think. I don't know ... Sometimes it feels like being in a closet ... being in a spiritual closet."

"Exactly! Who can you help heal or clear if you're in there? Liz, I know firsthand the emotional pain one goes through when embarking on this kind of path. I've been there and done that. Listen, don't be so hard on yourself. You did great today. I know it caught you off guard the way you were handled by that shadow figure. You're a smart woman; I'm sure you won't let that happen again. In time, you will gain more experience, and that will chip away at your fear. I've been down that road. I know how you feel now. It gets better. Honest."

Elizabeth looked out the passenger window and hoped Emily was right.

As they approached Elizabeth's parked car, Emily mentioned one last thing. "Make sure you clear yourself, Elizabeth. You've been exposed to a lot of bad juju. You don't want to bring that into your house and family."

Elizabeth nodded and opened the passenger door. "Thanks again, Em. It was some day."

"You'll be fine. Stop worrying. It brings your vibration down. If you need me, call me. Okay?" Emily waved and waited until Elizabeth was safely in her car before she drove off.

Elizabeth headed home with dread in her heart and fear on her mind.

Pulling up into the driveway, she saw her daughter Charlotte sitting on the outside steps with one of her girlfriends from school.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Mrs. Warren.”

“Hi, girls. What are you doing out here?” Elizabeth tried to sound casual.

“We just finished pizza and were hanging out out here. We might head down to the park later,” Charlotte replied.

“Oh nice, Dad ordered pizza?”

“Yeah, he seemed kinda grouchy about it, though. There wasn’t anything to eat for dinner.”

Elizabeth thought about their freezer stuffed with food ... but there was nothing to eat? *God, are they going use the excuse that I didn’t cook?*

“Well, don’t stay out too late.” Elizabeth walked past them on the steps and through the front door.

Here we go ... she thought. “Hi ... I’m home!”

She got a “Hi, Mom” from Molly sitting at the table eating pepperoni pizza from San Remos. “Hey,” Justin said, looking up at Elizabeth and waving. The dog ran up to greet her, blocking the stairs leading to the great room. A pat on the head and a slobber on the hand were a must before entering.

“Hey, guys,” Elizabeth said. “Oh, the pizza looks good.” She tried to smile as she walked over to Jack, but she could tell by his look that he was not in a good mood. *Shit.* Elizabeth went to give her husband a peck on the lips, but he barely responded. She could smell the wine on his breath.

“So how did everything go?” he asked in an icy tone. “You’re home pretty late. We had to order pizza.”

A question, an opinion, and a statement all at once. This is not a good sign, Elizabeth thought.

Jack watched his wife out of the corner of his eye. “Well, how come you’re so late? No phone call or nothing! I left messages on your voice mail, but you didn’t have the decency to call back!”

The kids heard his tone and got up to head to their rooms.

“Jack, jeez, calm down. First of all, stop yelling. I just walked in. Let me put my things down, and we’ll talk, okay?”

After placing her purse and jacket on the dining room chair, she turned her attention to her husband. “Hey, I’m sorry I’m late. Things ran longer than I figured. No big deal. It was a nice day. Let’s not ruin it because you had to order a pizza.”

“Maybe your day was nice, but mine was not! And it didn’t help that when I came home from a shitty day of work, the kids were lying around playing video games *with* their friends, the house was a mess, and there was nothing to eat.”

“Look, I said I was sorry. I’ll clean up. Don’t get all honked up, Jack.”

“Where exactly were you, Elizabeth? *And what exactly were you doing?*”

“Please lower your voice. How much have you been drinking?” Elizabeth was getting angry.

“Don’t try to switch the subject. I have a right to know.”

"I told you this morning: I went to a public meditation with Emily over in Walnut Creek at the yoga/meditation center."

"What the *hell* does that mean! What does this Emily do? Why all of a sudden do you want to go to 'public meditations,' whatever that means!" He was furious. None of this made sense to him. What was happening to her?

"Look, Jack, I'm sorry if you don't understand about meditation. I've tried to explain it, but you don't seem to hear me. Emily is a good friend, and she knows a great deal about meditation. She has a guru; she's been taught by highly experienced practitioners."

Jack snorted at that last bit. "Guru? Are you listening to yourself?"

Elizabeth said gently and slowly, "Honey, I love you. I am not partaking in anything that is wrong. Many people on this planet practice meditation. Lots of religions practice it right alongside prayer. It's opening yourself up and letting God come in."

"God, huh? Then what's all this bullshit about healing and Emily being a medium ... or a con artist is more like it! Are you paying her money?" He spat the words in her face.

She knew it! He had been in her trunk. He was throwing stuff around almost as though he wanted her to know he had seen everything. The bastard. How long had he known?

Elizabeth backed down. Their kids were listening to every word, hearing the fighting. "I'll talk to you when (a) you haven't been drinking and (b) when you have calmed down."

“You are turning into a crazy bitch, Elizabeth. I can’t believe you trust this woman! You think she’s teaching you something special? Yeah, I read your stupid notebooks. You think you can hide stuff from me? You’re wasting your time and *our money!*”

Elizabeth was already walking downstairs as he said this, tears streaming down her face and her head swirling. His words pierced her back like bullets. He had never spoken to her with such hatred. Or was it disgust? What was happening to her life?

She slammed the bedroom door and locked it behind her.

That night, a little seed of malevolence crept into Elizabeth’s heart. Jack could never sit down and discuss things. Lately, he’d seemed to be feeding off the screaming, the drama, and the gap widening between them.

When Elizabeth finally dozed off alone that night, the last thing on her mind was their former marriage counselor, Bonnie.

The next morning, Elizabeth was awakened by the sounds of her husband, his heavy, angry footsteps crossing the hardwood floor above her. He was still mad.

After hearing the front door shut, she got out from their bed.

As she walked into the kitchen, her daughter Molly was pouring herself a bowl of Cheerios. “What were you and Dad fighting about last night?” Molly asked. “He was pissed!”

“Yeah, I know. He feels really uncomfortable that I’m learning some new things that he doesn’t understand.” Elizabeth smiled at her youngest.

“Why would he get mad if you’re learning? Isn’t that what we do in school? Get smarter?” Molly was almost eleven now. She picked up on everything.

“You’d think so, right?”

“So what are you learning about?” Molly asked, always to the point. Elizabeth loved her for it.

“About God, meditation, spirituality ... other stuff too. I was mad at your dad because I had written in some journals—private stuff—and he found them and read them.”

“Yeah, I guess I’d be pissed too. I wouldn’t want anyone doing that to me.”

“Mol ...?”

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Do ya think you could stop saying *pissed*? It doesn’t sound so good coming out of such a smart, beautiful girl.”

“Oh brother. Really?” Molly smiled. *Really?* and *Oh puh-lease!* were her new favorite words.

“C’mon, let’s get you off to school. Ten minutes and meet me at the car.”

Now that Charlotte was in her first year of college and Justin drove himself to school, Elizabeth drove Molly in her little two-seater sports car.

After dropping Molly off and completing some errands, Elizabeth headed home. Sitting at the table, sipping Constant Comment tea, she made a list. First item: call Bonnie Max, the marriage counselor Jack and she had

gone to a few years back. She had helped them then; maybe she could help them now. They were in trouble. Second item: find new place to put journals. He was not to be trusted. Third item: call Emily.

Elizabeth called Bonnie and made the appointment for her and Jack.

Thinking about the second item, Elizabeth figured it would be a little difficult but not impossible. For the time being, locking the notebooks up in her safe-deposit box was the best idea.

Then Elizabeth called Emily and left a voice mail. "Hey, Em, it's Elizabeth. I need to talk to you. It's kind of important. Could you call me back as soon as you get this message?"

Elizabeth checked off her third item, hoping Emily would call soon. She needed to vent.

Finishing up the last of the tenant-landlord contracts, Elizabeth put the final signatures on and faxed them. It was a good feeling that she had two new families moving into the Palo Alto building. The increase in revenue would help out her family.

That was always good. Paying Charlotte's college tuition and books was getting expensive. The townhouse Jack and Elizabeth had bought after Charlotte's first semester there had been a golden move. It was a short walk or bike ride from campus, and Charlotte had three other roommates who deflected the cost of the mortgage.

Justin had another year of high school before he headed off to college. Maybe sister and brother would end up there together?

With an hour to go before she picked up Molly at school, Elizabeth parked in the back of the middle-school parking lot. She pulled out the small notebook she kept in her big purse. Lately, the purse had been feeling like luggage.

As she read her last entry in “The Ranter,” her heart sank. Her entries were becoming more and more frequent. What’s more, they were angrier than ever. *Better to write and get it all out than keep this harbored within me*, she thought.

She took up her pen and let her hand write the words that were weighing on her heart.

This has felt like a long seizure of frustration.
What the hell? What do you want from me?
What?

I’m drowning in the unknown—it wraps
its hands around my throat and squeezes
until my eyes water, until my tongue swells.
What do you want from me, God?

Time has plucked me from what I know.
I don’t know anything AT ALL ANYMORE!!
I feel horrible; I look even worse. My heart
breaks. It shatters and dissolves into
nothingness. I watch him watch others; his
eyes lock in. Yes, *I would*, he’s thinking.
Yes, I would. I like it; I want that. His
pupils enlarge, and then he looks quickly
away. *Oh, I might be caught, better not ...
not now.*

And why do we NOT TRUST?? Why do we pluck at the tender strings, the delicate transparent tendrils of trust? It's so painfully delicate now, so horribly tender, and you look. I've seen you! My eyes water again because I'm not who I once was before.

Life should expand for me now. It should blossom into possibility, but it stagnates in a bitter pool of memories. I cannot grow in this confusion of pain, hurt, fear, age, illusion! They say that age equates wisdom. HA, HA, HA! My heart lightens briefly—a nanosecond to enjoy the angry wryness, the mean humor. It mocks.

Keep moving, keep moving, my mind says. My heart says, Shut the hell up. You know nothing but sensitivity. Buckle up and take those strides into adulthood, and make yourself flow like the rest.

But something is crying; something is hurting; something is leaking. My soul maybe? Is my soul waiting for me to catch up with it? Is my physical body incapable of aligning itself with its housed spirit?

Just keep ranting, honey. This too will pass. Sigh. What am I supposed to do now? Fear overwhelms and straddles me. I cannot think straight. I cannot feel the fluffy nicenice spot I know so well.

Yeah, it's like the well of despair, and I'm drinking ever so deeply. I am quenched with self-righteousness. I deserve to be furious! I played all the games well. I reached and touched and felt. I obtained and magnified. I pushed and forgave. I relinquished myself on most things but not all of them.

Disjointed and exposed, I feel like I've been bitten by the bitter bug, the slice of pain I swore I wouldn't allow myself to indulge in. I swore it. Now look at me: I fell, and now I can't get up. Now what?

You'd better pray, girlfriend, pray for clarity, for peace, for yourself. When you teeter on the edge, you play with your sanity.

Slamming the notebook shut, Elizabeth sobbed deeply, her head upon the steering wheel. She looked over at the clock on the dashboard, fifteen minutes before Molly got out. Elizabeth dried her eyes on a tissue, took a long sip from her water bottle, and waited for her daughter.

Her phone rang, and she was relieved to see it was Emily. She quickly picked up.

"Elizabeth? What's up? You sounded upset."

"Hey, Em. Thanks for calling me back so quickly. Are you at work?"

"No, but I just got off at the hospital and am heading to the office to see a few clients, then home."

"Well, I was hoping to come in for a healing session. My world has turned upside down."

“Jack, is it?”

“Yep. We had a huge fight in front of the kids. I think he’d had a couple of drinks. He’s angry because I come to see you, *and* he basically admitted to reading the journals in my *locked* trunk.”

“Uh-oh. Sounds like you had some fireworks there. I have time tomorrow afternoon. Want to come in at three?”

“Yeah, see you then.”

“Try to get some meditation in, Elizabeth; it’ll help you.”

A cold war had officially begun in the Warren residence. Jack and Elizabeth were enemies, and the battlefield was their home. When words were spoken, only brief monosyllabic answers were provided. No “How was your day, dear?” No smiles and especially no kisses.

Unfortunately, in every war, there were POWs, and Justin and Molly were it. Having witnessed their parents’ fights in the past, they both steered clear of any entanglement. They showed up for dinner but then immediately headed back to their bedrooms. They understood that this could go on for days.

Driving over 92 always calmed Elizabeth. The scenic drive was so full of beauty with its green fields, tiny little houses, and small little shops selling flowers or garden ornaments. But today, that sense of peace was far from near.

A million things were swirling in her mind. Her faltering marriage was at the top of her list. She replayed the gut-wrenching words her husband had so viciously spoken. They were poison saturating her loving heart.

She pulled into Blessings' front parking lot and parked in the first space she saw. *It's time for me to stop acting like a coward*, she thought. *No back-lot parking anymore!*

At three o'clock, Elizabeth walked into the office, mad as hell and shrouded in black energy. Little black dots of anger and unforgiveness floated all around Elizabeth's head. A walking dichotomy.

Elizabeth nodded briefly to the new girl behind the desk, April. April smiled and waved back.

"Hey, Elizabeth. Glad you made it." Emily gave her student a hug.

"Hi. I'm glad I'm here," Elizabeth said in relief.

The two walked down the corridor and entered the little office in the back. Feeling a sense of peace and comfort, Elizabeth knew she was becoming deeply attached to the place. It felt so very different from just a few years back when she'd crossed the threshold of Blessings for the first time.

"So what's going on, Elizabeth?"

Breathing deeply and trying to center herself, Elizabeth took a moment to compose her thoughts. Otherwise, the words would hurl out of her mouth like a bad piece of undigested meat. As she recounted the last few days—all the details, all the words spoken, and all the pain left out for their children to see—Emily listened carefully and waited patiently for her to finish.

"I'm so sorry that you had to go through all of that," Emily said once Elizabeth was done. "I can see how upset you are. Let's open up our channels and see what's going on."

Emily opened up her channels to let guidance in, checked her source, and proceeded to talk to her angels. She then said, “I’m getting that you need to completely open up to your husband about your spiritual odyssey, Elizabeth. Your husband has had to learn from your notebooks what you’ve been up to. He’s angry—um, furious is more like it. He feels deceived and is afraid for you. The angels say to give him a chance. He’ll resist at first, but eventually he’ll be more receptive.”

Elizabeth looked down at the little white wicker table, then over to the healing table, digesting Emily’s words. Was it possible to share this education that she had hidden for so long with Jack? The thought was staggering.

But why had she been hiding the fact that she was becoming a healer from someone who was her partner for life? Learning about the divine was something so awe-inspiring. She wanted to help others with her knowledge.

Jack was angry because he was afraid that their life would change, and she’d been hiding things from him because she was afraid too. Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. “I can’t deny that I have been deceptive and secretive. I always tell myself to treat others as I would want to be treated, but with Jack, it’s different. There’ve been times when I didn’t care about how he felt. At times, I feel he’s way too controlling! I haven’t wanted to hear his opinions and attitude about something that means so much to me. He’s made it crystal clear what he thinks about metaphysics and the spiritual realm ...” She trailed off.

"I hear you. But is it possible that some of this is guilt on your part? *Because* you haven't shared much with Jack?"

"I suppose."

"I'm sorry this is so hard, Elizabeth. Why don't you hop on the table, and we'll see what your chakras tell me."

Lying on the table, Elizabeth took deep cleansing breaths until she heard the sweet chanting of Shri Ma, Emily's guru. Losing herself in the light state of meditation, welcoming the warmth that healing offered, she began to feel the releasing of negative energy. Her body clenched in the areas that Emily worked upon. The deepest of the spasms emanated from her third and fourth chakras, the solar plexus and the heart. Warm, salty tears slid down the sides of her face, making visible traces of her pain, finally taking their rest at the back of her neck.

She heard the snap, snap of Emily's thumb and finger and knew that Emily was breaking the etheric cords that bound Elizabeth's energy to another person, place, or thing. Fear created these cords, constricting and draining positive energy away.

The chanting stopped. It was over.

"You can get up when you're ready," Emily said.

Had it been five minutes or forty-five? Eyes opened and fixated on the ceiling fan, Elizabeth allowed herself a moment before she sat upright.

"How do you feel?" Emily asked.

Walking over to the white wicker chair, Elizabeth said, "I feel really light, good. It worked." She felt wonderful!

“You had a lot of negative stuff in you today. I’ve never seen so many cords coming from you. It’s all cleared, though.” Emily had a small frown as she spoke.

Elizabeth caught it. “Thanks, Em. I really do feel better. I guess all this crap going on between Jack and me is taking a toll.”

“Yeah, it is. Things will get better for you. It’ll take time and lots of patience on your part. Always remember that some people are not on the same plane of spirituality that you have risen to. It’s up to you to be a patient teacher, which you are. You do realize that Jack is one of your students, right? The divine will always put one of your hardest lessons right in your own backyard.”

“Well, that makes sense. He’s going to be the most difficult too, I’m sure.” Elizabeth shook her head at the prospect.

“Think of all the experience you’ve already accumulated! You’ve done tons of clearings with me, healings as well. You can teach your husband about what you do.”

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment. The idea that Jack could truly understand her, not only as a life partner but also an energetic healer, a child of God, made her heart soar. Was it possible?

On the drive home, Elizabeth thought of the very first time she’d assisted Emily on a healing. It had been frightening and exhilarating all at once.

The client had been a sixty-two-year-old man diagnosed with lung cancer. He’d been a smoker for most of his life, up until his diagnosis. He had been taking treatments of

chemotherapy and radiation. His health had dramatically suffered, and his energy was exceedingly low.

Ella, his wife, had watched him agonize through it all and couldn't bear the thought of him undergoing surgery soon, as the doctors recommended. Ella had contacted Emily and explained John's condition and made an appointment for a healing treatment two days later.

After five healing sessions, in as many weeks, John began to improve. His energy began to emerge, his nausea receded, and his sense of hope resurfaced again.

Prior to the sixth session, Emily asked John for his approval for Elizabeth to sit in upon the session, explaining that Elizabeth was emerging as an energy healer, under Emily's tutelage, and needed the practice. John, thinking two healers were even better than one, agreed without hesitation.

After introductions were made, the three sat down around the little white wicker table. Of the group, Elizabeth was noticeably nervous but making every effort to remain professional.

Emily said, "John, thank you again for granting your permission for Elizabeth to sit in on today's session."

"Yes, John, I appreciate this opportunity," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, well, sure, that's fine. I don't mind a bit." He looked at each woman as he spoke.

He was a sweet-looking man. He was of average height and almost bald except for a few stray hairs combed off to the side. His watery blue eyes had a look of kindness, seeming to take in everything around him. He wore a

simple khaki-colored jacket that zipped up the front, blue jeans someone had ironed to a sharp crease right down the middle, and sensible black rubber-soled shoes with white athletic socks peeking out above the laces.

John Campbell was an honest, God-fearing man. He'd worked hard as a maintenance engineer all his life, had raised two kids, and still loved the same woman he'd married forty-two years ago. He had just hit a bad patch—cancer.

He and Ella had decided the best offense was a strong defense, and they planned to use everything they could to fight. If that included healing sessions to make him stronger, well, he'd do it!

He *had* been feeling better since he'd started up with Emily, though he realized that could be due to what the oncologists were doing or his primary doctors or Emily, even the combo of all three. Hell, he didn't care! *Something* was working. His cancer was in remission. That was the point.

As John and Emily spoke, Elizabeth became very still. She observed the interaction between the two. John asked questions, and Emily responded with answers from the guides and angels.

Emily turned to Elizabeth and asked what she was picking up on. Startled, Elizabeth responded with a timid "I'm not sure."

Emily smiled and said, "Open up your channels, Elizabeth. Is that all right with you, John?"

John nodded and smiled.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, prayed silently, and opened herself up to the divine. "I'm getting ... um ..."

“Check your source, Elizabeth,” Emily warned.

Keeping her eyes shut, she asked and received the response she was looking for. “You have been with the same woman a long time?” Elizabeth said to John.

“Yes.”

“She is very worried about losing you. Has she given you something that was hers? Something to wear? Oh, it’s a cross ... I just heard it’s a cross!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

John hesitated, then looked over at Emily. He slowly moved his hand to the top of his jacket. In one quick zip, he opened his jacket to reveal a light-blue button-down shirt. At the opened collar lay a small golden crucifix. “Hey, that’s pretty good!” John said and laughed. Elizabeth beamed.

John gently touched the cross around his neck. “This was my wife’s father’s. I don’t really like to wear jewelry, especially in my kind of work, but my dear wife insisted when I began my cancer treatments. She said it will bring me luck.”

“Good job, Elizabeth.” Emily was indeed proud.

“Yeah, that was really impressive. I’m glad you are here to help.” John was sincere in his praise; Elizabeth could feel it.

The session was running out, so Emily suggested they move to the healing table to finish their work.

John took his place upon the table, face up as he laid down. He breathed deeply to relax his body. He felt comfortable and in good hands.

Elizabeth walked over to the small end table and lit a candle as an offering to the divine and for assistance

in the healing. Emily started the CD of her guru, Shri Ma. The gentle healing chant began. The soothing music flowed delicately around the room, soothing those that heard it. Both women stood at the foot of the table in silent prayer.

Then Emily motioned for Elizabeth to stand on the opposite side of the table, near John's feet, whispering, "We will start at his root chakra and work our way up to the crown. Clear any darkness you might see, and take note of where it was."

Elizabeth nodded. She was not anxious or nervous, as she'd thought she might be earlier in the day. On the contrary, a deep-seated calm rested in her body, the type of innate peace that came from knowing what one was meant to do.

For the first time, she lifted her hands above John's body, twenty inches or so, directly over his first chakra, near the bottom of the spine. In her meditative state, she opened herself up to the divine, as Emily had instructed her earlier that day. With her third eye open and receptive to truth and clarity, she could see the life force, the energy, as a bright light. The bright light snaked down her arms and blasted out her hands like a bolt. Her hands trembled from the power, and Elizabeth forced herself to keep her hands steady above the man. With her eyes still closed, Elizabeth observed her teacher, watching the bright light coming from Emily's hands as well.

Elizabeth took brief notice of the silent tears working their way down her face. This moment would forever be etched in her memory—a life-altering experience. Later,

there would be time to reflect on such celestial knowledge. For now, though, she must continue to focus.

The energy healers continued to work in tandem, moving from chakra to chakra. Emily cut the etheric cords protruding from John's neck, an indicator that his throat chakra was bound, which meant he had been bound from speaking his truth or writing about it. Snap, snap. With the click of her fingers, Emily broke the cords. Elizabeth watched the cords retract and dissipate. It took her breath away.

The women ended at the top, above his head. They gave thanks and praise to the divine for the opportunity to heal. The music stopped.

Elizabeth sat back down, still floating in her reverie. Emily sat quietly and said, "John, when you're ready, please come sit with us."

A moment or two went by as they waited for John to return to the group. When he did, Emily asked, "How do you feel, John?" Her eyes sparkled as she spoke.

He hesitated, thought about what he wanted to say, and said, "That was a truly spectacular experience. I cannot believe how light my body feels, like I've had a good night's sleep! My joints don't ache. I'm not nauseous one bit! I can't wait to tell Ella about how incredible you girls are! Thank you, Emily. Thank you, Elizabeth."

John handed Emily her fee, saying he would call her soon for another appointment. Elizabeth waited until the door closed before she bolted out of her seat and ran over to Emily, practically knocking her over with a bear hug. Elizabeth talked a mile a minute. "Incredible! Glorious!

Sublime! Breathtaking!” The adjectives flew around the room with a life force of their own.

Emily laughed as her student tried to explain what she had just experienced.

“Oh my God! I can’t believe what just happened! To see it, to witness what energy looks like ... it’s ... it’s ...” Elizabeth trailed off as tears began to fall.

“Here, take this.” Emily handed her a box of tissues. “You were awesome, Elizabeth! I’m so proud of you. I knew you’d be a powerful healer. The force of energy coming from your hands was amazing!” Emily laughed again, knowing that channeling that much energy was a rookie move. She had done it herself in her student days. It hadn’t hurt the client; she wouldn’t have allowed that to happen. But it was important for a lightworker to control his or her energy. Emily had no doubt that Elizabeth would become one of her best students.

Chapter 6

One Sunday afternoon, in late spring, Elizabeth had an intuitive hit and was guided to take pen and paper and write everything she was hearing verbatim.

It is the spirit that lives in the human form. The spirit, as eternal, returns to regard its lessons toward love. Love is the ultimate of God; the two are interchangeable. The lessons we learn, even when they seem horrific, are what we take with us to continue on. When spirit takes human form, we already know how long we will be here (even with God's gift of free will). These choices we make from our spirits mold our way to eternity. We meet others in our lifetimes as co-spirits. We learn from, love, give, and feel pain. All lessons are intricately woven—the good, the bad, and all in between. We may recognize another spirit; we may “know” them. With free will, we learn together.

This is all God's plan. We are never alone, only lonely. We are never really in pain but feel the physical condition of the human form. Spirit is love; it can grow closer to God.

We all have our turns; we all get chances. Always know that if you are ahead and have learned a bit more about spirit, you are, by God's will, entitled to help others. Ease their fears and relay what you have learned, like the telephone game.

Pass it on!

With strength and of course God's love and almighty wisdom, you will be given opportunities and adventures you can handle. You should, and must, push beyond your fear and engage with what you know.

Pass it on again!

Ease pain, give love, feel love, the gift of the almighty Father. It is blessed, and so shall ye be. Have faith! Always have faith, and that will carry you past the clouds of despair and antagonism. Know in your heart that you push forward not for personal gain but for the good of those you touch. Believe, child. You have examples. Follow them and absorb your lessons, and all will be well.

Go in peace and love.

Do not fear; it will pull you down.

If you move with good intentions, you will not need fear.

Jack had barely agreed to see their marriage counselor together, but he had agreed.

They took separate cars. Elizabeth arrived first. Jack showed up late. *It figures*, Elizabeth thought. *Always trying to be in control.*

While they waited for Bonnie to come get them from the waiting room, they sat as far away as possible from each other and didn't say a word. They didn't even exchange looks. It was as though each was preparing for his or her own side, for his or her own defense.

"Hello, you two! How are you?" Bonnie Max greeted them. She was sixtyish years old and always had a slight smile on her face. She had silver-colored hair and warm blue eyes and was gently plump for her five-foot-two frame. She was well-dressed and took care of her appearance. Her most redeeming quality was her authentic demeanor. She truly cared about her clients.

Jack and Elizabeth had come to know and trust her over the years. She had helped repair their marriage after many bouts of dispute about money, their children, and sometimes relatives.

Bonnie, maintaining her professional manner, kept her smile light. She ushered the couple into her office and closed the door behind them.

"Thanks for seeing us, Bonnie," Elizabeth said.

"Yeah," Jack puffed.

"Well, it's nice to see you both."

They exchanged a few pleasantries, with Bonnie inquiring about their kids and work.

Then Bonnie said, “So shall we get started? How are things going for you both?”

For the first time in a few days, Jack and Elizabeth looked at each other, sizing up who would speak first. Elizabeth held back to see what Jack would do, what he’d say. She knew that he was a drama queen and would jump at the first opportunity to stake his claim, establish his side.

“Well, um, we’re having a lot of problems at home,” he said. “We haven’t been getting along for a long time now. I think Elizabeth is getting mixed up with a cult.” He said this with droopy, concerned eyes that bespoke a boatload of assumptions.

“What!” both women said in unison.

Elizabeth jumped in. “God, you are ridiculous! Jesus, Jack, you’re nuts!”

It was as if a starter gun had gone off, signaling the start of a race. Both husband and wife began talking—loudly, for their own defense.

This went on until Bonnie put her hand up to signify they both needed to stop, now. “Look, I can see you are both upset,” she said. “Jack, you look distressed. Elizabeth, you look angry. Let’s start from the beginning, so I can understand what you’re going through.”

Bonnie turned to Jack and said, “Why don’t you continue, Jack.”

Elizabeth figured that was fine; she’d get the closing argument.

“I think Elizabeth is getting into some weird religious stuff—a cult or something! She’s been spending a lot of

time with some woman named *Emily*.” The words came out snarly, and he spat Emily’s name.

Bonnie nodded and wrote something down in her notebook resting on her lap.

“I’m afraid that Elizabeth is giving this woman our money for I don’t know what! Elizabeth is reading all these books and listening to CDs about some spiritual mumbo jumbo. I’m not sure what the hell she’s doing! *And* she’s going to some Hindu ... or ... or ... Indian people to go meditate and *pray*?” At this point, Jack turned to Elizabeth. “*Why can’t you pray at our church! What are you doing with this woman? How do I know you’re not gonna hurt our kids ... or me with this crazy shit!*”

He stopped. His face was the color of the bowl of cherries Elizabeth had in their kitchen. He had flecks of spittle on the bottom of his chin. His eyes bore into Elizabeth. His gaze was filled with anger and frustration and was bordering on hatred. Elizabeth was grateful they were in Bonnie’s office for this display so that Bonnie could see this rage.

Bonnie let a moment go by. “Jack, I can see that you are very upset right now. I’m sorry for whatever you and Elizabeth are going through, but I’m sure we can work through it. We have in the past. I know you are both very committed to your marriage, to your family.”

Bonnie’s words soothed Elizabeth. Jack needed to calm down and get a grip. This was a marriage, a partnership, not a dictatorship. Jack was not her God.

“Elizabeth, would you like to respond?” Bonnie asked.

Elizabeth nodded. She was ready. She had been rehearsing this speech all morning long—for months really, even years. It was time.

“First of all, the public meditation I went to a while back with Emily was at a church in Palo Alto. Public meditations are held at different churches because they’re considered sacred places. People come together from all kinds of religions to pray and meditate.” Looking straight into Bonnie’s eyes, she continued, “We pray and meditate for ourselves, for our families and friends, and for world peace.”

Jack couldn’t help himself. “Oh brother! Will you listen to that!”

Bonnie said, “Jack, she has the floor; let her finish.”

“Anyway, as I was saying, Emily is a friend of mine. I met her through my massage therapist, Amanda. Jack knows Amanda; he had a massage with her once. I’ve known Amanda for years. Emily is a surgical nurse at one of the nearby hospitals, has been for over thirty-five years. She offered to meet me at the public meditation; I decided to go, no big deal. I learned how to meditate at karate, nothing new ...” Elizabeth trailed off.

“Okay, so, Jack, you feel uncertain about what Elizabeth is learning?” Bonnie offered.

“There’s more to it than that, isn’t there, Elizabeth!” Jack said.

“Shri Ma is considered a spiritual teacher and guru. Yes, she is from India. She has an organization that unites people in prayer and meditation, people from all over the world. I’m developing my spirituality, and he’s threatened!” Elizabeth stabbed a finger in his direction and continued,

“Look, I already knew a great deal about meditation, prayer, the chakra system, and healing—just not to the extent I’m learning now. In order for me to graduate from the Catholic college I went to, we had to study twelve units of world religion. It was required for a liberal-studies degree, to be able to relate and have a better understanding of *all* people, of *all* religions, of *humanity*—not just my religion, Catholicism. We had to learn about other people on this planet in order to become teachers. Jack doesn’t seem to understand this or even *want* to understand! It’s his way or the highway.”

Elizabeth was on a roll. She explained that she had been raised a Catholic and had attended Catholic schools for most of her life. She believed in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. It was important to her that Bonnie and Jack understood that she found peace when she and Emily talked, meditated, and prayed. “I stopped smoking a few years back. I take better care of myself. I *feel* more at peace. I am proud of where I’m going. It’s like a thirst that has finally been quenched.”

She turned to Jack as she went on. “I pray for you every day, hoping you will have a glimpse of what a beautiful opportunity this has been for me to grow and to be who I am meant to be so that I may teach you and our children ... anyone who will listen ... about the divine world we live in.”

The look on Jack’s face was not as frenzied. He seemed to have heard what she’d had to say, some of it at least. She thought, *Maybe there is hope; maybe he will see.*

“Okay, Elizabeth. Well, um, thank you,” Bonnie said. “I know that was a lot of sharing for you.” Bonnie then turned to Jack. “How do you feel about what Elizabeth just said?”

Jack hesitated before he responded. He knew he’d spoken out of anger before, and he was determined not to look out of control again. *Elizabeth is not going to look better than me.* A faint smile crept upon his face. He took a deep breath and exhaled ever so quietly. He addressed the marriage counselor. “As I said before, why can’t she go to our church and get what she needs there? They have women’s clubs, prayer groups, stuff like that. Why is this lady from India so much better?”

He turned to his wife. “You say you are a Catholic, but you are running all over the place with Emily. Why doesn’t she come to our church?”

Two sets of eyes looked upon Elizabeth.

“I suppose I never asked her.” Elizabeth looked down at her hands and realized he had a point. Was she “running around,” as he put it, because ... why? More excitement, the thrill of doing something that Jack couldn’t do anything about?

The room fell silent.

Bonnie spoke first. “I’m sorry to say we are running out of time. Would you two like to come back next week? Or if you’d prefer, you can come in separately, if you think that would help.”

“I think we should come together,” Jack said.

Elizabeth nodded in agreement, and the date was set for one week.

Bonnie said, "It might be a good idea to write down any concerns or topics you want to cover next time. Keep in mind that it's very hard on children to hear their parents' fight and argue." She tilted her head slightly and smiled. "Have hope, you two. I'm sure we can work things out."

"Thanks, Bonnie," Jack said while walking out the door. He walked down the stairs and was gone.

"See you next week, and thanks again." Elizabeth pulled out her car keys and shut the office door behind her.

It was almost dark as Elizabeth made her way to her little car. She thought about what they had talked about as she drove the short distance home. It was a start.

Chapter 7

The silence was comforting. Elizabeth's breathing was slow and shallow. She was in a state of deep meditation in which she heard all things but could not be disrupted. Her third eye was open and receiving vivid images. She was surrounded by truth and clarity with nothing to fear.

Elizabeth sat in front row of the chapel altar, receiving messages in black and white mostly with some flashes of color. She saw faces and images of birds and animals—sometimes animated, sometimes just staring at her. People would speak; she could see their mouths move but could not hear the words spoken. She could see the expressions on their faces, but silence prevailed. For her, on this plane, communication transpired through the heart.

Guruji had always said to observe, not to interpret in the midst of meditation. “Let it flow,” he'd said. Guruji had been a master yogi and spiritual guru to thousands throughout the world before his death at age 116. His teachings were known as Kundalini Maha Yoga, an ancient practice that had been taught for thousands of years—a spiritual practice, not a religion.

“I have come here for the dissemination of spiritual knowledge. My message is straightforward; I invite you all to come, sit, meditate, and experience and judge for yourself. May God bless you all,” he would say. He’d taught all who had come to him. Regardless of race, color, creed, or religion, Gurujī had opened his heart and ashrams to those searching for a better understanding of the divine.

He had been Shri Ma’s yogi and guru. Shri Ma had been a young woman when she’d become his heir to carry on the primordial lineage. Shri Ma, considered an enlightened master, as Gurujī himself, perpetuated the spiritual teachings that had come before her for thousands of years. Travelling extensively in India, Europe, and the United States, Shri Ma conducted public meditations and Kundalini Maha Yoga retreats, providing spiritual guidance and shaktipat initiations to those seeking this sacred rite.

Shaktipat was the transference of energy from a master to a student. This source of energy, also known as kundalini (an ancient Sanskrit word) energy, had two states: the dormant state and the active, awakened state. An individual with this energy in the dormant state would lead an incomplete, unfulfilled life. His or her understanding of the universe would be restricted, and all things would be interpreted or perceived in a confined scope. However, once the energy source was activated, through the awakening of the kundalini, the individual’s progress on the path of spiritual transformation would be swift. Guru and student were forevermore linked through the shaktipat rite.

Elizabeth had attended many of Shri Ma's public meditations along with Emily and various friends. The very first meditation she had attended had been magical. The musicians, the chanting, and Shri Ma herself had evoked peace and love.

Emily had purchased one of several books written about Guruji and given it to Elizabeth as a memento. Elizabeth had written on the inside cover to mark the incredible, monumental evening. She liked the idea of meditating for world peace, the offering of oneself for the greater good of all. Many of Ma's students were kind and very dedicated to their spiritual path, including Emily. Since the day Emily had received shaktipat from Shri Ma, she had been very devoted to her guru.

Elizabeth always felt uplifted and filled with love when she watched and listened to the teachings of Shri Ma. She felt light and peaceful as she internalized the positive energy that Shri Ma gave so freely. It had to be truth that such gurus offered to those who would accept the gift of shaktipat! It had to be!

But lurking around in Elizabeth's head was the idea that good Catholic schoolgirls did not pay allegiance to another. Jesus, yes. A guru, no. Yet all the while this argument ensued within Elizabeth's very soul, she welcomed this idea of pure love. The message was the same: "We are all children of God, regardless of who we pay our devotedness to." *Does not the holy Father, or the divine, if the name matters, have many representatives?* Elizabeth thought. Ascended masters came from many countries, spoke many languages, and had different

customs and rituals, but they all essentially said the same thing: love oneself and each other.

Wars had been fought, people slaughtered, and countries overtaken, all for the advancement of different groups' beliefs.

When the idea of shaktipat came up in conversation with Emily one day, Elizabeth knew it was something she truly wanted to do. She knew that she was always loved and looked after by God. This would bring her one step closer to him.

The day was overcast with fog as Amanda, Elizabeth, and two of Amanda's friends, Erin and Karen, crossed over the Bay Bridge early that Sunday morning. They were driving to Walnut Creek to Shri Ma's house. She taught, meditated, and gave shaktipat there, always welcoming anyone who wished to, as Guruji and now Ma said, "come, sit, meditate, and discover for yourself."

The light chatter of women's voices circulated the interior of Amanda's car. The four women were hoping for a deeper spiritual path that day, and they all believed it would happen with shaktipat.

They stopped off at a grocery store to pick up a coconut, an orange or an apple, and red roses for Ma. They had all been given instructions of what to bring, what to wear, and what to do after the event had taken place. It was of the utmost importance to follow these directions exactly.

"Why are we bringing coconuts?" Karen asked Elizabeth.

Amanda chirped in, "It has something to do with the ritual. I'm not sure, but I heard from Emily that the fruit we bring will be blessed by Shri Ma and given out after the ceremony. The flowers are an offering for Ma, but the coconut ... don't know."

Erin and Elizabeth looked at each other and shrugged. They figured that Emily had the inside scoop, because she had gone through the ceremony years before.

"I'm glad that you decided to come today, Amanda," Elizabeth said. "I know you had reservations, just like me ..." Elizabeth flickered a smile. "I almost didn't show up this morning, but I knew if I didn't I would deeply regret it. The idea of the lost opportunity or something kept propelling me forward."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I *had* to show, because I was driving." Amanda laughed. Then very quietly, out of earshot of the other two women, she asked, "Do you think we are messing with our souls? Could Shri Ma mess us up?"

Elizabeth glanced down at the black-and-white linoleum floor of the grocery store. She thought for a moment and said, "I think if we believed that, we wouldn't have come. I guess it's natural to have some reservations about spiritual ceremonies, right? We're gonna be fine; I feel it."

Amanda nodded.

Back in the car, all their supplies loaded in the trunk, the four women drove down the street where Shri Ma lived, arriving right on time. About a dozen cars were parked on the block. Amanda maneuvered hers next to

the curb about ten houses down from where they were headed. Other people were walking toward Shri Ma's house, holding bags of their items and carrying flowers, just like they were.

"How many people do you think will be here today?" Karen asked.

"Forty are receiving shaktipat. I asked when I called to register," Elizabeth chirped.

Down the walkway on the side of the house, a line was beginning to form, about eleven people. As they approached the door, they could see people were being asked to remove their shoes and place them off to the side of the landing.

"Hello, welcome," Lupti, the shaktipat coordinator, said with a smile and bowed.

"Are you here for shaktipat?" Lucinda, Lupti's assistant, asked.

"Yes, all four of us," Amanda said.

Elizabeth had seen Lupti and Lucinda many times before. They were long-time disciples of Ma's. Wearing traditional saris, they looked like Hindu goddesses. After attending many public meditations and events here at the house, Elizabeth felt comfortable around them, comfortable here.

Watching as the disciples checked their group in, Elizabeth listened to all the instructions and knew what to expect when it was her turn.

Lucinda turned to look at Elizabeth. Lucinda was a sweet-natured woman with clear light-blue eyes. She spoke with soft words but strong conviction. "You look

familiar. I have seen you at some of the events here. What was your name?" She smiled.

"Elizabeth Warren."

"Welcome, Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth, okay. Oh, here you are." Lucinda ran her finger down the middle of the list and then placed a check mark beside the name.

Watching Lucinda make the mark beside her name gave Elizabeth a jolt of excitement. This was really going to happen.

"We're collecting the fruit and the coconuts here," Lucinda said. "You can place them in those bins over there. Keep the flowers, and you can hand them to one of Ma's assistants later. Also, were you able to follow all the instructions for the at-home preparations?"

"Yes, I haven't had anything to eat. I took a shower, washed my hair, and put on all freshly laundered clothing." Elizabeth felt silly repeating this, but it was required, and everyone else had to do it too.

"Great! Looks like you're ready to go. You can find a place inside to sit; use your asan if you have one."

"Right here." Elizabeth tapped the bag that held the small maroon prayer blanket she sat on to meditate and pray. It was said that everyone should have his or her own individual asan. Elizabeth had never washed it because the positive energy that came from her was retained in it.

The four women navigated through the large house, making their way to the living room and dining room area. There was barely a stick of furniture to be seen. Either

Shri Ma and her husband, Bapaji, lived as minimalists, or the house had been cleared for the ceremony. All who attended really didn't care.

Everyone receiving shaktipat faced in one direction, toward a large burgundy sofa with cream silk panels draping the front and back. Behind the sofa, attached to the wall, was a large framed painting of Guruji, one that Elizabeth had seen many times before. His face was wrinkled, and his hair and beard were nearly white from age. It was said this portrait had been painted when he'd been 110 years old. He'd died at 116.

There were two microphones, one at each end of the sofa—one for Ma and one for Bapaji. Large glass vases beside the microphones were filled with fragrant red roses. Four musician, off to the side of the couch—three women and one man—were warming up their instruments. Elizabeth could not identify what the instruments were, except for the drum and tambourine.

When the music began, almost everyone had settled down. Most were sitting upon their asans, waiting quietly. Some had their eyes closed in prayer. Others were talking softly to their neighbors. One thing was certain: the energy in the room was pulsating with anticipation.

Elizabeth looked over at Amanda; they were sitting side by side.

"Are you ready?" Amanda asked.

"I am," Elizabeth replied.

"No doubts?"

"None whatsoever." As Elizabeth replied, a huge smile spread across her face, and a sense of calm entered her

heart. She was ready to take this path to the next level. She knew this was meant to be for her.

“And you?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yep.” Amanda smiled, but it did not reach her eyes.

“Good.”

Lupti made her way up to the front of the room. The musicians continued to warm up until she reached for one of the microphones. “Welcome, everyone. We should be starting within the next five minutes or so. Shri Ma and Bapaji will be here shortly. In the meantime we wanted to give you some brief information on how our day is to go. First, after Shri Ma and Bapaji arrive, they will provide the specifics of your shaktipat ceremony. After their talk, we will be going into a meditation. Then the ceremony will come after that. We’ll take a break for lunch; we have a lovely meal provided for you by some of Ma’s students. Then we’ll return for satsang, a question-and-answer period that students and new shaktipat devotees can participate in. They’ll be final shaktipat at home instructions, then Ma’s blessing. It should be a great day for all of you!” She bowed to the audience and said, “Namaste.”

The music began as soon as Shri Ma and Bapaji entered the room. All eyes were on Shri Ma’s graceful beauty that one could not help but notice. Bapaji, of average height and slender build with kind dark-brown eyes and shortly cropped gray hair and beard, walked behind her with quiet elegance.

Ma and Bapaji paused here and there to acknowledge the people in the room, bowing and saying, “Namaste.” Long-time devotees prostrated themselves, forehead

touching the ground, as a sign of respect to their guru. When one bowed one's head in this way, the crown chakra was exposed to the positive energy radiating from the guru. Just being in Shri Ma's presence uplifted everyone's energy level.

Shri Ma's pure-white silk sari flowed around her body, purified mist trailing the slightest of movements. Her long dark-brown hair woven with golden ribbon nearly reached her waist. The light caught the shine of an oval-shaped ruby she wore on the forefinger of her left hand. Three golden bracelets encircled her left wrist. Those fortunate enough to sit in the first few rows in front of the couch could hear them make a tinkling sound when her hands moved. Large diamonds sat at the center of her earlobes. Some said Ma sparkled; others said she emanated a white light. Regardless of what was said about her, she radiated peace, calm, and love.

Ma sat at one end of the couch, shifting the silk panels of her dress as she settled in. Lupti softly spoke to Ma as she maneuvered the microphone closer to her guru.

Bapaji walked to his spot on the couch, stopping momentarily to bow to the audience. His crisp white linen shirt and white slacks hung gracefully around his body. He would be assisting Shri Ma in a long ceremonial process, and it was important he be comfortable. Lupti placed Bapaji's microphone before him. The room grew very quiet as he began to speak. "Welcome, everyone. We are so happy to see many new faces today, but that is not to say we are not happy to see the familiar ones too."

Light laughter spread across the room.

“Today is a very auspicious day for those of you who have come to receive shaktipat. Guruji was a master at Kundalini Maha Yoga, with the power to awaken dormant kundalini energy in spiritual candidates. After studying for decades in India, Europe, and the United States, he chose Shri Ma to carry on the lineage of guru. This lineage goes back thousands and thousands of years.

“While Guruji walked the earth, because of his pure love and devotion to humankind, he shared this sacred rite with all who asked. Other masters in various parts of the world disagreed with Guruji. It was their feeling that shaktipat should only be given to those who had dedicated their lives to the spiritual—a teacher, a master, and so forth.”

Bapaji stopped to look at Shri Ma. Then continued, “Today, tens of thousands of people all throughout the world have received this rite, just as you shall today. It is with great devotion to Guruji and his dream to support one’s quest on the true path of the self that we are here, this very day.”

Shri Ma said in her sweet, melodic voice, tinged with Indian singsong sound, “Welcome, everyone. It is with great honor that we offer shaktipat to you. You will surely receive the love and grace of Guruji today. He will open doors to realization for you. He may or may not be your teacher; Kundalini Maha Yoga may or may not be your path. Yet the grace of Kundalini Shakti and the grace of a saint, through Guru Tattva, will always be yours. So have faith, fear not, and work hard at your daily practice, and you shall reach your goal.

“Keep in mind, Kundalini Maha Yoga is not a religion but an ancient universal science, perfected over thousands of years. It is a spiritual practice that brings lasting inner peace and happiness to all students, from any religion or belief.”

Bapaji said, “Based on a very simple principle, every human being is comprised of divine energy, or kundalini. With this we have two states—dormant or active and awakened. When the source is dormant, people may lead unfulfilled lives, incomplete. These people’s understanding of the universe is restricted, and they sense and anticipate most everything within a limited capacity. However, when the source is activated, they can progress rapidly on the path to self-realization. They will realize the full potential of mind and body; attain inner peace, harmony, and fusion; and sequentially experience the ultimate truth of unity in diversity, the fact that all of life is bound together as one by the divine power, love.

“Shaktipat is the transference of the guru’s awakened energy to the aspirant. *Shakti* means ‘energy’ or ‘power’ in Sanskrit, and *pat* means ‘transfer.’ This is conducted by Shri Ma either by touch, sight, or her intention.”

After seemingly hours of watching and waiting while the other aspirants received this sacred rite, it was finally Elizabeth’s turn. She looked beautiful. As she walked by others in the room, some stopped and took notice of her. She smelled of jasmine and looked radiant.

She wore a freshly starched sky-blue linen top with a lacy white tank underneath and white capris that showed off her new pink pedicure. Her light-brown hair was long and shiny with a little curl at the end. It smelled of jasmine

too. She was not wearing any jewelry, except for her diamond wedding band, which she never took off, not even for today.

As she knelt before her new guru, a jolt of excitement raced through her heart. She tried not to smile, for this was a sacred rite. This called for composure. But those who looked at the woman in the sky-blue blouse would say she radiated joy and happiness.

Grateful and honored, Elizabeth, hands in prayer position over her heart chakra, at the center of her chest, bowed and then prostrated herself out of respect for Shri Ma. As she rose to look Ma directly in the eye, Ma's blue eyes flashed green. *So that is how it will come to me ... through her eyes.*

Volumes were spoken, but not one word was uttered between the two. Elizabeth felt strange. Her body had not moved; she was still directly in front of Ma, transfixed. Her eyes still open and gazing upon her teacher, she was swept away onto another plane of existence. A kaleidoscope of colors flashed in her head ... lots of white flashing. Her body stiffened from the healing energy.

As seen in her third eye, a form emerged from a bright white mist. It came closer to her, an enormous being. As it drew close, she was not afraid. It was talking to her in a very familiar voice. They spoke without words.

"Roderick!" she exclaimed. "My God! Is that you?"

In a low British accent, he said, "Yes, my lady, it is I."

No! This can't be happening, she thought. But indeed it was. Elizabeth had spoken to Roderick many, many times in the past but never had seen him. He stood over

ten feet tall. His entire body was covered in long black spikes. They were everywhere. His head was made of spikes, no eyes, no mouth. His chest and brutal arms for crushing were made the same. He had no hands but paddle-shaped limbs with steely nails, ready for impaling. His legs and feet were shaped like tree trunks, black with spikes. Roderick was menacing, terrifying.

“My lady, it is I, Roderick, your guide.” He spoke gently with a touch of mirth.

“Good Lord, man! You are frighteningly beautiful. Why am I not afraid? I’m awestruck!”

“Because I am your guide, there is no need to be afraid of me. I come to you in many forms—flowers, birds, a kiss. Today is different. You are receiving shaktipat, and I am showing you a warrior. You must be prepared. You are deepening your spiritual awakening. You shall attain great wisdom, inner peace, and harmony within this lifetime. You will be a teacher to many. However, there will be strife and battles before you. It is God’s will to choose those who have strong convictions and are willing to fight for it, as you are child.”

That frightened her. “What do you mean? God chose me? I don’t follow.”

“Through divine wisdom, God places certain qualities within his children so that they may do his work. It’s very simple.”

“So *what* am I supposed to do?”

“Bring healing, love, and peace to the planet. You have already begun with those around you and have had some small success, but you have a long way to go.”

She contemplated his words ... or thoughts ... or however this was happening. Finally, she said, "Roderick, I am grateful that you have appeared. It's very reassuring. In my deepest self, I know this journey is right and true, yet I am losing so many things in my life as a consequence! My marriage is blasting apart. My husband is questioning my sanity, and he is trying to sway my children to do the same. Not only that, but these skills, these truths that I learn ..."

She stopped to compose herself as she noticed the tears sliding down her face. "I have lived my life up until this point to be like everyone else! I didn't want to stand out; I didn't want to be different! I strived to assimilate, be the good woman, a good mother and wife, a good neighbor. Not a *freaking weirdo*! But here I am. I cannot help it. I know I'm supposed to travel down this road; I know it like my own face! But all the while I am losing almost *everything* I have tenderly created." She was sobbing.

"My lady, it is with the greatest respect that I say this: it is only fear that is preventing you from moving forward. God loves all his children and will not put upon them any more than can be tolerated. Call upon me when you need support."

With that, he disappeared.

Distant sounds gently became more audible. "*Jiva shivam paramashivapade yojayami swaha, om yam linga-shariram, shoshay, shoshay swaha!*" ("I, to Shiva, in the highest Shiva place, I join in union the subtle body, dry, dry out the impurities!")

Elizabeth's eyes were still open and gazing upon her guru, and she realized she was back in her body.

Shri Ma's eyes were closed now, and her right hand was over Elizabeth's head as she whispered an ancient prayer. With the ring finger of her right hand, Ma settled a small red dot of crushed sandalwood paste at Elizabeth's third eye. This was to remove any obstacles, so that her new student would see only in truth and clarity. Ma took a rosebud from the many in the vases nearby and swept the sweet-smelling flower over Elizabeth's third eye, head chakra, and eyes, cleansing and purifying as only a blessed one can.

Elizabeth, in a state of tranquility, a yummy peacefulness she had never known, accepted a small plate Ma placed into her hands. The plate contained one coconut, one banana, one orange, and a handmade set of mala prayer beads made from dried chickpeas. Elizabeth bowed to give thanks for the gifts and moved away on her knees, making way for the next recipient of Shri Ma's ancient rite.

Back at her asan, Elizabeth placed the items right beside her, looking at them as though they were made of gold and encrusted with jewels. She took a few cleansing breaths, not allowing herself to analyze what had just transpired—meeting Roderick *and* receiving shaktipat.

Then she remembered that those who had received the rite were to wait and meditate until everyone was finished. She slipped into a very deep meditation and spent the next few hours in a dreamlike state—throughout the farewell instructions to the new students, the blessing from Shri Ma and Bapaji, and even the car ride home.

The four women were unusually quiet, lost in their own reverie. At last, Elizabeth was dropped off at her car at their meeting spot near Highway 92 and 280, across from

the reservoir, the same spot she parked to meet Emily when they went on clearings and healings.

Opening her door, she turned and waved to the others. Now what? It had been a very long day; the sun was beginning to go down over the hills. Sitting in her car, looking out over the water, she was tired but didn't want to go home just yet. Where else to go? *I could go to the chapel, but it's getting dark, and I don't want to be walking through the empty campus parking lot at night—not safe.*

Lee's? Maybe.

She dialed her friend's cell number and got her voice mail: "Hi! Sorry I missed your call—" Elizabeth hung up with no message.

Well, looks like home after all. With a deep sigh, she started the engine. She decided she was going to tell Jack *exactly* where she had been but not necessarily *what* she had done. He couldn't handle the truth.

Pulling into the garage, she mentally prepared for the onslaught of questions she would need to endure. As she entered the house, she could hear the TV on in the great room and Molly's stereo playing some new boy band song but nothing else.

The dog greeted her at the top of the stairs, wagging her tail, so excited to see her mom. "Hi, sweetie." Elizabeth rubbed Lucy on the top of her head and gave her a pat on her rump. "You're such a good girl." There was something special about how gentle and kind golden retrievers were. Elizabeth was so grateful to have this dog in her life.

As she moved down the second set of stairs, Jack came into view. He was staring straight ahead watching

the news. A cocktail glass with lots of ice and an amber-colored liquid in it sat next to him on the side table. *God, nothing changes! Nothing!*

"Hi," Elizabeth ventured.

"Hi. Justin is sleeping over at Ryan's tonight. Molly and I already ate."

"Oh, okay. Uh, good."

"Hi, Mom!" Molly yelled from her room.

"Hey, Mol. How's it going?"

"Good. I have a soccer game tomorrow morning at nine. Can you drive me?"

"Yep, no problem."

Elizabeth was too tired to eat anything but grabbed a glass of red wine to bring downstairs. "I'm going to take a bath."

"Fine, night," Jack said.

That was the extent of their conversation. Elizabeth was relieved as she headed to their bedroom.

Sipping her wine, she reviewed the papers she'd received from the shaktipat ceremony. She still needed to do a couple more things, but she had a month to finish them. She put the papers and the new CD (a recording of Guruji chanting the ram mantra) in a purple notebook. She put the notebook under stacks and stacks of books, so it would be hard for anyone to notice at the bottom of her closet. She wasn't taking any chances.

She turned on the bathwater, watching the steam rise from the tub. She added lavender-scented bath salts that made the room smell glorious.

A warm bath, then to bed. Tomorrow was another day.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s me!” Elizabeth said.

“Well, hello, me! Nice to hear from my busy daughter. How are you?”

Before Elizabeth could respond, Victoria launched into the current events at Cranmoore, a beautiful retirement community she had been living in since before she’d met her current husband, Colin Grady.

Colin and Victoria were both retired and lived in this small city, population ten thousand, that was still considered part of the Bay Area. Cranmoore was an ideal place for those who wished to either remain living independently in small condos and townhouses or have assisted living and twenty-four-hour care.

Victoria had chosen this resort-like community for several reasons. It was beautiful and had two golf courses, several community pools, and an endless number of clubs, events, and off-site traveling if one wished to participate. Plus, it was a gated community that kept the undesirables out. That made her feel safe. Health care, hospitals, and medical buildings were just a quick ambulance ride away, *and* it had turned out to be the perfect place to catch a husband, which Victoria had been looking for.

Victoria had been a schoolteacher and principal; Colin, a vice president banker in San Francisco. They were a perfect match. Colin, an Irishman, had come to the United States as a child. He’d been married and divorced and had two grown children and a couple of grandchildren he treasured. He was a warm, kindhearted man with a great sense of humor. Victoria’s entire family adored Grady.

They approved of the match, even though it was Victoria's third marriage.

"Well, Mom, it sounds like you've been busy," Elizabeth said after getting all the Cranmoore news. "It's nice that you and Grady go to the tea dances every Friday ... sounds like fun."

"It is; Grady is a great dancer. So how are you? I'm sorry I've been prattling on! How is everyone doing in the Warren house?"

For a moment, Elizabeth hesitated. Maybe she wouldn't say anything about all that had been troubling her, but then she changed her mind. She supposed she just wanted some good old-fashioned comfort from her mom. "Um, well, things have been a little tense around here lately. Jack and I are back in marriage counseling. It's kinda been tough."

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry! At least you're working on it. That's a positive. Marriage is difficult. I know; I've done it enough. Trust me: marriage is the toughest sport around." Victoria continued, "That's certainly true, but I have to say Grady is different; he's one in a million."

"Yes, he is." Elizabeth was Grady's number one fan. "With Jack's business, two teenage kids living in the house, and my work, life is getting so complicated. Jack's drinking a lot more too. I'm sick of it!" Shit, that had slipped out.

Victoria was too much of a lady to comment, although she had seen Jack overindulge once in a while. "Elizabeth, I'm glad you're seeing someone to help sort out your problems. You're doing the right thing. Maybe when things settle down a bit, you should get away for a few days."

“You mean Jack and I? We did have a really great time in Italy. That might be a good idea!”

“Um, yes, that sounds good too. But I was thinking in terms of you, yourself, going away. Take some time off from everything. Go to a spa! You certainly can afford it.”

That wasn’t a bad idea. Her mom had suggested this many times over the last couple of years.

“I’ve read about this magnificent place near San Diego—the Gilded Door,” Victoria continued. “They have weeklong packages. You’d be ultimately pampered. Get away for a while and take care of you! At least think about it, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth felt a little jolt of possibility. It felt good, the idea of that kind of freedom. “You know, Mom, that’s not such a bad idea. The kids are old enough; Justin could drive Molly to school.”

“And I’m not that far away if something should come up ... Really, Elizabeth, think about it.”

The conversation turned in a new direction. They talked about Elizabeth’s two brothers and their families and what all the cousins were doing.

Out of the blue, Victoria brought up Elizabeth’s dad, Arne.

Elizabeth, a bit surprised, said, “I know it’s hard to believe that he’s been gone nearly five years. In some ways it seems like it just happened ... In others it feels like it’s been a decade. I’m in the process of dissolving the trust he established when he died. The lawyers are working on it now.”

“Elizabeth, do you think that’s another reason why Jack is being so difficult? You know he was always threatened

by your father—his money, his education, his profession. Not many people can say their dad was a successful captain in the merchant marines, traveling all over the world.”

“Yes, I do. He knows that the lawyers have advised me to establish my own trust and to place all the assets, real estate, and any other holdings into the new trust—for the kids, ultimately. Any inheritance stays with the individuals that inherited, no community property. Maybe it does piss him off ... At this point, I don’t care, Mom.”

“I’m just saying. Jack has always been the man of the house. He’s a very traditional man’s man.”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll come up in counseling ... Look, Mom, I gotta go ... Thanks for listening to my venting.”

“That’s what moms are for. Everything will turn out fine, Elizabeth; you’ll see.”

As she hung up the phone, Elizabeth realized her mother was probably spot on. Once, when Jack and Elizabeth had been first married, Arne had offered to buy a stove for Elizabeth, a brand-new Viking she had been dying to have. The kitchen in the old house had been so badly in need of remodeling. They’d done the best they could with a few minor repairs to the floor and countertop, but the stove had been barely usable. Elizabeth had always been barbecuing, microwaving, or using an electric wok. Even she couldn’t be that creative. She had a family to feed every day.

But Jack had refused the gift stove from Arne. “We can buy our own stove,” Jack had said.

And that had been that.

She'd had to wait a couple more years for her new stove. Jack had been able to swing a deal with a friend who worked at Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, and they'd been able to get the Viking stove at cost.

Chapter 8

Heading out to show an apartment late in the day, Elizabeth thought it might be a good idea to swing by the chapel later, if the showing didn't go on too long. Sometimes people liked to chitchat about the neighbors and such. She understood this, but today, she was planning to be home to cook a nice dinner. Jack and she seemed to be holding a truce. After the counseling session, the fighting had dissipated somewhat. That was a good sign.

After she'd showed the apartment to the young couple, the man said, "We would like to take an application; we really like the place." His pretty girlfriend nodded in agreement. They seemed like a nice couple. Elizabeth could see them living in the unit in Palo Alto.

"Sure. Just be sure to complete and return it as soon as possible; we've had a lot of interest in this one." Elizabeth smiled.

Handing the paperwork over to the couple, she thanked them and said she could process their application as soon as she received it. Elizabeth locked up, and they all walked to the street together. She waved as she pulled away.

Looking at the clock on the dashboard, she figured she'd have just enough time to make it to the chapel, her refuge. Every time she drove up the long oak tree-lined drive at the university, she allowed the sense of warmth and peace to descend upon her.

As it was late afternoon, not many cars were in the parking lot. Day-class students had already left, and the night students wouldn't begin classes for another hour or so—perfect timing for solitude at the chapel.

The sun was beginning its late-afternoon descent, faintly glowing behind the thick, fluffy pine trees. Again Elizabeth noted how fortunate she had been to have attended this university. It was beautiful.

Ascending the stone stairs alongside the Japanese red maple trees, she looked up. A bird of some sort was flying near the church bell. Wait. She grabbed the stair railing for support and shrouded her face against the sun, trying to get a better look at what type of bird it was. It took her breath away. It was a red-tailed hawk, circling, floating along with the slight breeze, above her. She had been taught many years ago that, according to Native American lore, when a red-tailed hawk flew above you, a very important message was on its way to you. Her antennae were up.

She opened the glass doors into the foyer and walked briskly to the large wooden doors she had opened thousands of times before. The sense of anticipation delighted her.

The very first thing she observed inside was what she had expected: no one was there. She was greeted

by nothing but the faint glow of the red candle at the right side of the altar. Some said the candles was a symbol of Jesus Christ, with the wax symbolizing his body; the wick, his soul; and the flame, his divinity. Others said that a candle was a connection to prayer, with the burning flame representing the prayer rising to God. Regardless, the candle was always lit.

A large smile spread across her face as she dipped her fingertip into the holy water and made the sign of the cross. She was here, and so was Jesus. She had a lot to tell him today. *Hope he's in a listening mood. But then, isn't he always?*

Her steps were light because of her flat shoes, no clickety-clacking down the long church aisle. To her left, the sun filtered through the stained glass. The reds and yellows were especially vibrant today. The colors made faint shapes upon the wooden pews ahead of her. Today, she sat in the thirteenth pew on the left side. Thirteen had been Elizabeth's lucky number since she'd been a kid.

Elizabeth had been drawn to that side of the church and that pew and was just going with it. Breathing deeply, basking in the solitude, eyes closed, she was ready to open up her channels and receive. A flash of memory skipped across her mind—shaktipat. A gift given to her.

She was infused with wave after wave of light. Her body felt weightless, buoyant, formless. Her senses were heightened, her channels open, her third eye receiving. Her third eye looked back at her, acknowledging her existence. Images floated by. Colors flashed. Voices sounded.

An angel appeared, an effervescent outline of gown and wings, glowing wildly.

“Who do you serve?” Elizabeth asked without words.

“The Lord Jesus, the incarnate Son of God,” the angel conveyed.

“What shall you have me know?” Elizabeth asked without speaking.

“You are beloved, child. You are on your path of destiny. It is with love and compassion that I ask this of you.”

Elizabeth waited.

“The Virgin Mary has a message for you. Kneel beneath her, and she will disclose all.”

The angel dissipated as quickly as she had emerged.

Elizabeth walked over to the statue of the Virgin and knelt on the altar, on the cold hardness of the Carrara marble. “Blessed Mother, I have come to you, as I was told to. I am here for whatever you may need of me. I am grateful to be your daughter.”

Small flashes of blue light popped around the statue. Elizabeth was used to this; it was a sign that Mary was there. Elizabeth’s solar plexus contracted and expanded several times. It was a download.

“You are a great comfort to children, relating to them, caring for them, and teaching them,” a voice said. “Child, you have been a good mother, and because of these things, your life will always be connected to the young. They are safe with you, and they know it.”

Before Elizabeth could process what she was “hearing,” the voice continued, “Do not be afraid to place the sign of the cross upon yourself. It will forever remind you of your

lifework and will steadfastly protect you as well. Go in love and peace, child.”

Dust motes floated by, and the light in the chapel began to fade. It was nearly dark now.

Elizabeth allowed herself to return back into her body. Passionate thoughts ran through her mind, providing her with the definitive move that she would make next. It was a crazy idea. Would she be brave enough to follow through with it? *Yes! I'm gonna make it happen.*

Thoughts of leaving were nearly impossible. She belonged here, was safe here. But she picked up her purse and keys; genuflected, bowing her head deeply; and slowly walked down the aisle.

At the doors, she turned and faced the enormous statue of Jesus on the wall and said aloud, “The next time I’m here, I’ll be different, Father.”

She dipped her fingertips once again into the holy water, crossed herself, and headed out into the night.

Two days went by, and Elizabeth was heading over to Half Moon Bay. She was almost beside herself with excitement. Not only did she have the chapel event to share, but she and Emily were planning to visit the cemetery where Elizabeth’s dad, Arne, had been buried five years ago this very day. They had planned this weeks ago.

Located at the top of Highway 92, Heaven’s Terrace Cemetery had the best coastal views in the county—just for the dead. It was one of Elizabeth’s favorite places. Oftentimes, she would drive around the grounds looking

at one spectacular view after another, usually before and after a nice visit with her dad.

Today, she and Emily would reminisce, say some prayers, and pay tribute to his life.

The bells on the door jingled as Elizabeth opened the front door to Blessings. She looked over to see who was working. Rose was at the desk today, checking clients in and adding up the shop purchases.

“Hey, Rose!”

“Elizabeth! I haven’t seen you in a while. How have you been?”

Rose had only been working at Blessings for a few months now. The healing center was becoming well known, by word of mouth. Business was doing well, and they needed the extra help to handle it. Rose was in her early twenties. Her dirty-blond hair was hiked up into a ponytail that made her sweet face look chubby. She was a kind-natured woman who sincerely cared about the clientele.

“I know!” Elizabeth said. “I’ve been around. Been busy with work, kids, and Emily.”

“Yeah, Emily has been saying you’re doing really well with the healing stuff. Good for you. The world can use another healer.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Thanks, Rose. Emily is an excellent teacher. I’m enjoying it. Is she in her office?”

“Yep. Go on down; she’s expecting you.”

Elizabeth waved as she headed down the hallway. “Knock, knock ... you in?” she called at Emily’s door.

“Come on in.”

Emily was dressed in a navy-blue running suit, her hair pulled back into a loose bun. She had just come from a hike with her dog on the bluff. There were such beautiful trails all over the coast, most with gorgeous vistas of the ocean. It was a nice perk to make up for living in nearly perpetual fog. Emily looked healthy and vibrant; no one would ever guess she was even close to being a fifty-seven-year-old woman.

Elizabeth walked over to give her a hug. They sat. Both started speaking at the same time. They laughed.

"I've got some news," Elizabeth said.

"Really? Me too!"

"You go first! Mine is a bit of a story." Elizabeth made a wry face, thinking about how Emily would react.

"Okay. I'm leaving Blessings and opening my new office! I'm so excited!" Emily was beaming.

"Oh God, Em, that's wonderful! Oh jeez! I'm so happy for you! Where will it be? Do your clients know yet?" Elizabeth jumped out of her seat to give her mentor a hug.

"Well, not everyone, not yet. But I have given notice here, and the word in this town spreads fast. I'm moving just a block away, right here on Main Street. The Trivolta Building had a vacancy; a lawyer is moving to San Francisco, so the space opened up. The best part is the rent isn't too crazy. I can afford it between my regular clients and my job at the hospital."

"Let me know if you need any help moving or anything. Em, I am so happy for you!"

"So tell me your news!"

“Well, I’ll give you the gist of it; I know we’re heading over to my dad’s grave.”

Emily waved her hand in a *Not to worry* gesture.

Elizabeth leaned forward and looked Emily in the eye. “I was downloaded at the chapel. I spoke with an angel, and she told me to kneel in front of the Virgin Mary and listen to a message. I saw a red-tailed hawk before I entered the chapel that day, flying not too far above me.”

“Go on.”

Elizabeth paused; she knew this was going to sound insane. “Mary told me not to be afraid to place the sign of the cross upon myself. She said it would always remind me of my life’s work and provide me with protection as well. She said, ‘Go in peace, child.’ I’ve decided to get a tattoo of a cross. I’m going to use the design of the cross I bought at the Vatican a few years back. This one.” Elizabeth lifted the garnet-and-gold cross on a long golden chain from underneath her sweater.

Emily shook her head and flashed a smile. “You’re not going to believe this, but when I first became a healer, one of my clients made this for me ... for protection. It repels demons and bad entities. They hate it.” Emily lifted a woven four-strand choker from underneath her blue hoodie. It had garnet and gold beads with a golden cross in the middle. It was beautiful.

“Oh my God!” Elizabeth’s hand flew up to her mouth. “I’ve never seen that before!”

“I forgot I had it. I’ve been wearing it for protection myself lately. I’ve been doing a lot of clearings, some real difficult cases, poltergeists. I didn’t think you were quite

ready for that yet.” Emily smiled. Then she asked, “Are you really sure about getting this tattoo? That’s a pretty big deal.”

“I know it is, but I know I’m meant to do it. I already have a tattoo, so I know what to expect.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, I was seventeen, freshly graduated from high school and in Maui with a girlfriend. We talked about it a lot, then just decided to go for it. We went to a little shop in Lahaina above a storefront. The shop was clean, and the tattoo worked out fine ... a mark of independence. I got a red rose, and Ellen got a butterfly.” Elizabeth continued, “I like it, and no one can see it either ... Still, Jack was pretty angry with me ... We were dating at the time.”

Emily howled with laughter at this story, wiping a tear from her eye.

Elizabeth began to giggle at the memory as well. “I guess I’ve always been a bit of a renegade.”

“I’ll say! You’re one tough cookie, my friend. Have you said anything to Jack?”

“Are you kidding? No!”

“So one day you’re going to show up at home with a tattoo on your body ... without having said *anything* to your husband?” Emily’s eyes were as big as saucers.

“I haven’t figured out the details yet ...”

“Oh, Elizabeth ... please think this through. Are you still in marriage counseling?”

“Yes.”

“Promise me you’ll think this whole thing through, okay? I get that you were downloaded; I understand that

you were spoken to. I support you on whatever you do; you know that. But remember, you are married. Consider if Jack came home with a tattoo without telling you ... That's all I'll say. Okay?"

Actually, that thought had crossed Elizabeth's mind. She didn't think she'd care. It was his body, his choice. But she said, "Okay, I'll think on it."

"Good. Let's get going. I've gotta be back here in a couple of hours."

They walked down the hallway and paused at the front desk.

"Rose, Elizabeth and I are going to Heaven's Terrace for a bit. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Emily smiled and added, "Elizabeth is getting a tattoo."

Rose's eyebrows raised up.

"Em!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"What? Better get used to the idea."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Really, are you gonna get one, Elizabeth?" Rose looked surprised. Elizabeth was so professional looking. She was a mom!

"Yeah, I am. But I need to figure out where I want it and who to go to ... Do you know any places?"

Rose lifted her leg and showed them a brand-new tattoo on her ankle with her mouth wide open. "I haven't told anyone yet, but I just got this yesterday ... Wow! I've got chills."

So did Elizabeth, but she didn't say a word. "Where is the place?"

Rose told her and said her girlfriend's father owned it and that he did really good work.

Elizabeth got the number and said, "Thanks, Rose."

Out in the parking lot, Elizabeth asked Emily, "Do you want to follow me? My father's grave is a little tricky to get to."

"Okay," Emily said. She got into her white Lexus and waited for Elizabeth to take the lead on Main Street.

They turned onto Highway 92, the main drag in and out of Half Moon Bay. Elizabeth led the way in her little black sports car, periodically looking in the rearview mirror for the white Lexus. Elizabeth chuckled to herself as she realized that usually, 95 percent of the time, she was the one following Emily, which was not an easy feat. Emily had a lead foot like no other. The woman could give Jeff Gordon a run for his money.

The fog and mist were heavy today. Elizabeth figured she should drive a bit slower, as the roads were slick. *Emily will have to deal with it*, she thought with a chuckle.

Heading up the winding road, they passed mostly farmland and nurseries. There were a couple of horses at play in the fields beside the Christmas tree farm, running in and out of the misted trees, so free. *What would it be like to have that kind of freedom, not a worry or care, especially not about what others thought? Just to be natural, your own authentic self?* Elizabeth pondered.

They went up, up, up to the top of the mountain. Just where the mountain crested were the gates to the cemetery. Elizabeth put on her signal and turned onto the narrow, curvy road that brought them to the entrance. They passed through the baroque-style gates. The black gates were very tall, and on the top of many posts were

little gargoyles, their teeth bared and tongues sticking out to scare off any evil spirits. On a day like today, with the mist so thick, one couldn't help but expect to see an evil spirit reaching out of the fog.

Emily and Elizabeth continued to climb, past the funeral office, past the children's graveyard, until they reached their destination: the veterans' memorial burial ground. This was considered a newer area for the veterans' graveyard. It had spectacular views of the valley, and just beyond that, on a clear day, you could see the vast expanse of the ocean.

Pulling off to the side of the road, Elizabeth parked her little car, rolled down her window, and flagged Emily to park behind her. As Elizabeth got out of her car, a cold blast of wind seared right through her. It was a cold, damp afternoon. She gathered the folding chairs and blankets from her trunk and waited for Emily.

"Thanks, Em, for doing this ..." Elizabeth said as Emily joined her. "We won't stay too long. It's freezing!"

Zippering up her coat to the neck, Emily said, "Hey, what are friends for?"

As they slowly walked up the soggy hillside, Elizabeth thought back to that day, that horrible day, the day she'd had to pick the plot for her dad, all alone. It had been pouring rain, an El Niño year.

Sharon, the funeral director, had driven Elizabeth to several areas around the cemetery so Elizabeth could select Arne's final resting spot. The windshield wipers hadn't been able to keep up with the sheets of rain slamming the black van. On the side of the van, "Heaven's

Terrace Cemetery, Peace amongst the Clouds” had been very discreetly painted in gold. Elizabeth had felt she was closer to hell.

Sharon and Elizabeth had gotten out of the van. Wind whipping the extra-large black Heaven’s Terrace umbrella, they’d trod up the muddy grass, water and mud running over their shoes. Elizabeth hadn’t even been able to feel her feet at this point.

“We have these two plots. They’re marked with the red flags,” Sharon had yelled over the din of the storm.

Elizabeth had glanced briefly at the two spots. “That one!” She’d pointed to one of the plots, knowing it was a stab in the dark.

Thank God it’s raining, Elizabeth had thought, because her face had been stained with tears. Such a difficult task for a daughter to do, picking out her father’s grave.

Sharon had nodded and indicated that they should return. They’d nearly run down the hill back to the van.

That had been five years ago.

The spot Elizabeth had chosen had ended up being a glorious area. On a sunny day, the view was breathtaking. Elizabeth had always figured the angels had been guiding her that day.

“Did you protect yourself?” Emily asked.

“Yep, right before we entered the gates,” Elizabeth said, coming back to the present.

“Good. There are a lot of spirits hanging around here, some of them demonic ... Can you see the red eyes?”

Being a medium had its advantages. You could see what you were dealing with. “Not yet. I can sure as hell

feel them, though ... I'll open my channels once we sit. Is that okay?" Elizabeth wanted to make sure she was making the right move.

"Yeah, that's fine."

They unfolded the chairs, grabbed the blankets, at sat on either side of his marker, a twenty-inch-by-ten-inch gray stone engraved with a name, a birth date, a death date, and "He served his country" on the last line. That was it. Elizabeth realized as she placed a bouquet of red roses on top of the stone that those few words represented a life.

"Are you okay?" Emily asked from beneath layers of blankets.

"Yeah. It's been five years today ... Man, that seems so long ago, and then it doesn't," she said as she sat back into her chair, wrapping a red blanket around her chest.

"Tell me about him," Emily said.

The women sat—one talking and the other listening, a friend bearing witness to the other's memories of happy times and sad. Elizabeth's voice wobbled with emotion, and she shed a tear here and there and laughed at the silly memories she held dear.

Elizabeth memorialized him, and they both recited many prayers. They prayed for his soul ... and theirs. They prayed for all those buried beneath the ground, behind the marble mausoleums, and underneath the ornate statuary. They prayed for the children who had lost their short little lives and now lay beneath the green grass.

The mist had retreated up the mountainside, and rays of sun worked their way through the clouds. Surrounded

by divine white light, angels called to their sides, Elizabeth and Emily spoke easily among the thousands of graves, with spirits and demons around them. Nothing could touch them. It was empowering.

“Looks like the sun’s trying to come through ...” Emily smiled.

“A fitting end for an emotional day ... Thanks again, Em,” Elizabeth said as they collected their belongings and headed back to the cars. “From my heart, thank you. It was a good day of remembrance.”

“Yes, it was. Glad I could be here. When do you see the lawyer?”

“Next week. Arne’s trust will be dissolved and my own established. I’m kind of nervous, though.” She shrugged her shoulders slightly as she placed the last of the stuff in the car.

“Why? You’ve been dealing with his finances and real estate for five years already! Besides, the lawyers handle all the legal stuff.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess it’s a new chapter in my life. It was so difficult in the beginning—the lawyers, the financial advisors, the accountants. God, there was so much to learn, so much to understand. I was so afraid of making mistakes.” She shook her head at the memories. “I was dealing with his death and estate while also being married, raising three kids, working, and relocating because we had torn our house down. I probably had a nervous breakdown and didn’t realize it.” She smirked.

Looking back up the hill, she could still see his marker and the red roses that lay upon it. “Maybe he knew that it

would take me five years to get used to all the responsibility. Huh, I used to think he was just being a pain in the ass.”

Emily looked at her watch. “Hey, I gotta go ...”

Elizabeth gave her a hearty hug.

Waving good-bye, they went their separate ways.

“Archangel Michael, please come by my side ...”

Elizabeth recited her protection prayers aloud as she drove down the hill. She took one last look in her rearview mirror and saw the red eyes behind the gates disappear. “Ha! That’ll teach ya!” *Another demon bites the dust.* It had turned out to be a glorious day.

Having a free day with no one needing her at work, no appointments, and no things scheduled with the kids, Elizabeth decided it was time to research a tattoo artist. She had a couple of names and looked on the Internet for more info.

After picking a favorite from the Internet, she went to first check out the place Rose had spoken of, just to check it out. She quickly determined the place was out of the question. It was a seedy, dirty head shop. They specialized in selling drug paraphernalia—bongs for smoking pot, scales for weighing marijuana or cocaine, and so on. The two people working behind the counter looked as though they hadn’t bathed in days.

The tattoo area was in the far back of the shop. Elizabeth pulled the beaded curtains apart to get a closer look, the brown beads making a swoosh sound as they closed behind her. All along the walls were drawings and pictures of whatever you could possibly want inked, and

there was a brown vinyl-coated table off to the left side of the cramped room. At one end of the table there were tears in the fabric with some of the stuffing coming out, and at the other was a stained yellowish pillow. Disgusting. On one of the shelves nearby were pots and pots of ink—blue, brown, black, red ... on and on. The tattoo machine itself seemed very old, with a worn-out black electrical cord.

“Can I help you with something, lady?”

Elizabeth turned quickly around. One of the two employees was standing right behind her. He reeked like a walking joint.

“Uh, I, uh, was just checking out your tattoo area back here ...”

“No one is allowed back here unless you have an appointment. Do you have an appointment?”

She scowled. “No ...”

“Then you can’t be back here.”

“Yeah, okay, sorry ...” She trailed off. She turned on her heel and walked back through the beaded curtain.

The employee followed her through the beaded curtain and down past the glass cases of body-piercing jewelry—for everything from the eyebrows to the genitals to even the ankles—and the cases filled with vaporizers, pipes, papers ... and more stuff that she didn’t even recognize.

As she headed to the door, she overheard the other employee ask, “What the hell was her problem?”

“That older lady? I dunno. Maybe she wanted a piercing and chickened out.”

“Hahahaha, yeah, those old cougars are the fuckin’ crazy ones. I know this guy; he dated one once. She

had him doin' all kinds o' shit to her in bed, tying her up, slapping her around ... Crazy ..."

Stinky shook his head and went back to reading his *High Times* magazine.

Elizabeth nearly slammed the door behind her. *God, that place has an awful vibe to it ... bad energy.* She shivered and walked quickly back to her car. *This isn't the one; that's for damn sure.*

Getting back on the main road, El Camino Real, she headed to the place she had seen online, which was a twenty-minute drive away. She thought maybe this wasn't going to be as easy as she'd anticipated. Certainly, she wouldn't jeopardize her health, regardless of the message she had received at the chapel. Getting a tattoo could definitely be a health risk; needles, paint, and blood were involved.

She pulled up in front of the second place. "Custom Tattoos" was painted on the smoky glass storefront. The door was open. "This must be it," she said to herself.

The website had said tattoos were by appointment only, so Elizabeth had called ahead on her cell phone to make sure that someone would be there. The owner, Mark, had said he would be around the shop until five. It was two fifteen now.

Walking over the threshold of the shop, Elizabeth took note of how clean and tidy the place seemed. The walls, like the other place, were covered with colored drawings of every kind of person, place, or thing imaginable. The counter was made of glass, and underneath it were actual pictures of people modeling their newest tats—men and women of all colors, sizes, and ages.

“Can I help you?” the man behind the counter—Mark, she presumed—asked.

“Hi. I just called a little while ago ...” Elizabeth trailed off.

“Oh yeah, you said something about a custom tattoo?”

Behind Mark was an open space with long tables filled with paints, pens, drawings, paper towels, and a few tattoo machines. There were mirrors on a couple of the walls, and Elizabeth could see her reflection as she spoke. “Yeah, I have a piece of jewelry, a cross, that I wanted to, um, basically have a design made of ... for a tattoo. Do you do that?” *Do I sound like an idiot?* she thought. *Probably.*

“Yeah, I can do that. I’d need to see it, and then I can draw up some sketches ... pretty easy. I’m Mark.” He put out his hand, and she shook it.

Elizabeth gauged that he was in his late thirties or early forties. He was plain looking with a quiet demeanor. He seemed like a guy who kept to himself, not a loner exactly but someone who liked to keep his own company.

“This is what I would like a sketch of.” Elizabeth took the garnet cross off from around her neck and placed it on top of the glass.

Mark took a look at it. “Nice. Can I take a closer look?”

“Sure.”

He pulled a jeweler’s loupe from a nearby drawer and examined the piece.

Elizabeth nervously rambled on, “It’s garnet and gold ... I bought it at the Vatican when I was in Italy not too long ago ... I would like a tattoo of it ...” *God, lady, shut up! Stop talking. Idiot.*

“Okay, so I can take a few pictures of it, draw up some ideas, and get back to you when they’re ready ... maybe a week or so?”

“Yes, okay, that’s fine,” Elizabeth said. “So can you kind of go through the process with me? Like what should I expect ...?”

“Oh, yeah, well, come on back.” He pointed to the back area. “I can show you my equipment, where we do the work.”

Noticing the glass back door to the parking lot, Elizabeth didn’t feel threatened. She followed Mark just a few feet away. He showed her a chair that reclined, a couple of straight-back chairs, like in a dining room, and a padded black table.

“These are the paints I use,” he said. “They are individually wrapped by the manufacturer for one single use. They’re really good quality too. And here’s the tattoo gun; it is sanitized after every use. See this needle head? It is also a one-time-use thing. We dump them after each use.”

Little thimble-size pots, shrink-wrapped, lined a shelf. He had package after package neatly stacked. The needle heads were the same—small, the size of a dime, and shrink-wrapped and lined up on their own shelf. Another shelf contained paper towels, markers, cotton towels, Band-Aids, and a huge first aid kit.

“Where were you thinking of placing your tattoo?” he asked.

“Well, I’m not really sure ... Maybe behind my neck? Back? I don’t know.”

“Some parts of the body are more sensitive than others. Anywhere on the head and neck is very painful ... the feet too. Somethin’ to think about.”

“Thanks. How long will it take?”

“Depends on how big ... where it’s going ... I’ll have a better idea after I do the sketches.”

“I guess the price depends on the sketches too?”

“Yep. The bigger the tattoo, the higher the price. I’ll give you a quote.”

Elizabeth walked back to the front of the shop, stopped at the counter, and turned to face Mark. “So I’ll wait to hear from you?” She gave him her cell number and walked out the door, elated.

After turning on the engine, she rested her head on her hands. She was going to do this. That was that.

Chapter 9

After much deliberation, online research, and *What the hell, why not?* reasoning, Elizabeth booked a flight and made reservations for a one-week stay at the Gilded Door, a luxurious spa located in the beautiful hills of San Diego, California.

Elizabeth had been contemplating the stay for years. Her mom had spoken very highly of it, always telling her, “Go and take care of yourself, Elizabeth; no one else is going to do it for you.”

Well, now she was going.

Not surprisingly, Jack was not happy. He wasn’t furious, as she’d anticipated, but angry nonetheless. He kept quiet as Elizabeth explained to him this was something she needed to do for her sanity. She wanted to recharge, get some perspective. Plus, they needed a break.

She was able to use the funds from her brand-spanking-new trust. The trip was a good investment in herself and nonnegotiable.

The day of her flight, Elizabeth gave Justin and Molly a hug just before heading out the door.

“Have fun, Mom, while we stay here and keep Dad company,” Justin said half joking.

“Aw, c’mon, Just. It won’t be that bad. You can do all the barbecuing—Dad loves that!”

“Yeah, that’s true ... Don’t worry; I’ll keep things running here at the farm.”

“What!” Molly said. “God, Justin ... it’s always about you. I feed the cats and dog and clean the cat tray *and* unload the dishwashers! Jeez ... a little credit here.”

“Look, guys ... I just need to recharge my batteries. It’s not like I go off on business trips all the time. It’s only a week.”

Molly was not happy. “Mom, I really don’t think it’s fair that you’re leaving now, especially when I have my orchestra concert coming up this week. You *said* you’d be there!”

“I need to go; I’ll make it up somehow.” Elizabeth sighed.

Molly stomped away.

Elizabeth followed her to her bedroom and gave her a hug. “I’ll be back before ya know it,” she said.

She walked back down the hallway, gave Justin a hug, and said good-bye.

Jack was in the truck waiting for her. He was to drop her off at the airport. With suitcases stowed in the back and a final wave good-bye, they were off.

“So what do you do there at this spa place? I mean, how many massages and facials can you get in a week?”

“Well, it’s not just about the pampering. They have rigorous workouts, and there are speakers that give

lectures on health stuff. You can take different classes, like on nutrition and tai chi and the chakra system. It's a health week for mind and body. The chefs even prepare special low-calorie meals if you want to lose weight ... stuff like that." Elizabeth felt she was trying to justify *why* she was going.

"Hmm, well, I guess if you like that kind of stuff."

"Look, I'm sorry if you feel like I'm abandoning you or something. You'll be fine. The kids are old enough to take care of themselves ..." She trailed off. *I'm not going to put myself on the defensive. I'm not*, she thought.

At one of their many marriage-counseling sessions, Bonnie had taught Jack and Elizabeth a few exercises to communicate more effectively. Elizabeth tried one now. "I feel that you are not understanding how important it is for me to go away. I feel that we need a break from each other. I love you and hope you can see my side of things."

Jack gently smiled and looked over at his wife. "Oh, I get it ... communication exercises."

"Yep."

"Okay, *I feel* that we've been getting along better—not perfect, but better. I feel that you are running away for some reason. You know things are getting really stressful at work. We can't supply the construction jobs with enough men. We're losing contracts and money! I need your support."

"I've always supported you, c'mon, Jack. It's just a week." *Man, how many times have I said that!*

"Will you at least call me?"

"Yes, of course I will."

At the departure terminal, Jack unloaded her suitcase and handed her the satchel. They embraced and shared a kiss.

She felt euphoria as she passed through the automated doors and into the airport.

When her plane landed, she took out the information that the spa had provided and doubled-checked the instructions. She was to meet a driver outside after collecting her luggage. After getting her luggage and navigating through a throng of people, Elizabeth stepped outside.

"Mrs. Warren?" a man asked. He was holding a sign with her last name on it.

"Yes, I'm Elizabeth." She stuck out her hand.

"I'm Davis; I'll be your driver."

All settled in the black limousine, Elizabeth began to relax.

"Where are you coming from?" Davis asked.

"San Francisco Bay Area. I live along the Peninsula."

"Oh, I used to live in San Mateo."

"Oh, nice," she said with a smile.

"One thing is for sure: the weather is always so nice, anytime of year."

Elizabeth agreed.

They chatted on and off for the remainder of the ride.

Then the Gilded Door came into view. It *really* was gilded!

"The door you see up ahead was brought in from Japan when the spa first opened," Davis said. "It's an antique, over two hundred years old. They say once you pass through those doors, you will never be the same."

“Boy, I hope not.”

He smiled.

Elizabeth watched with unveiled delight as the large double doors opened.

A lovely, slender woman, with long auburn hair and wearing a pale-green silk dress, approached Elizabeth. She smiled at Davis as he whisked Elizabeth’s luggage into the lobby. “Welcome, Mrs. Warren. We are so happy to have you staying with us for the week. My name is Jessica; I will be checking you in. Please follow me this way.”

“Thank you.”

Another slender woman, this one carrying a silver tray of frosty glasses of juice, approached Elizabeth. Elizabeth took a glass and took a sip as she followed Jessica to the lobby. The doors closed with a whisper behind them.

Koi, with their vibrant orange and red colors, shimmered weightless in their ponds. The landscape echoed serene elegance. Small vignettes of ferns and exotic scented flowers dotted the property. Manicured lawns bumped up against the individual Shinto-style bungalows each guest stayed in.

Inside the open-air lobby there were wooden-backed sofas ornately carved with Asian flair and small black lacquered tables discreetly placed throughout. Palms in huge blue ceramic pots were placed here and there. Elizabeth and Jessica passed a display case housing a collection of jade figurines and another of colorful silk fans. Elizabeth was enchanted. The warm breeze blew gently through the lobby. A long bank of folding glass

doors at the end allowed for a stunning view of the pool and more gardens.

Just as she passed a gilded antique mirror, Elizabeth caught a reflection of herself and was horrified! Black bags under her eyes, a scowl on her face, brown and gray hairs shoved into a sloppy bun. The crisp white shirt she had put on earlier had a beige makeup stain at the collar. Her face looked puffy, and her jeans were too tight across her belly. *Dear God*. The stress from the last few months had played right across her face and her waistline. Marriage, children, job, *and* trying to fly under the radar with her spiritual life and lying about it had taken their toll. She needed healing. Now.

Jessica motioned for her to enter the large glass office. Elizabeth tried to relax. She forced a smile.

“Please make yourself comfortable. Would you care for more mango juice?” Jessica asked.

“Oh, no thanks.” Elizabeth didn’t want to be known as a juice hog on the first day!

“Okay, then I’ll be right back.”

The office was decorated in the same style as the lobby—a quiet elegance.

Jessica returned a couple of minutes later and sat behind the desk. “When our guests arrive, we like to get some ideas of the kind of week you’re looking for. Some are looking for peace and quiet, mostly taking advantage of our extensive spa services.” Jessica handed her a thick, glossy menu of what was offered. It was extensive—everything from scalp massages to foot reflexology.

Jessica continued, "Others are interested in a completely filled schedule—early-morning workouts, beauty treatments and classes, lectures, and more. Our chef even provides cooking classes. You can see the options here in this binder ..." Jessica handed over a binder listing all the amenities. It was even more extensive than the spa-services menu.

"Oh my goodness, I had no idea that you offered so many options!"

"Yes, it's a lot to consider. That's why we like to know what you're interested in. Then we can create a custom daily schedule just for you."

"I would like to relax, but these workout classes are interesting. Kickboxing, yoga, spin, tai chi, boot camp, belly dancing, pole dancing? What's that?"

"Oh, you'd love it! We have a dance teacher come in and teach the moves of an exotic dancer—pole dancing." She giggled a bit.

"Yep, gonna try that one." Elizabeth chuckled.

"It's one of our most popular classes. Fills up quick."

Elizabeth also wanted to drop a few pounds while she was there. Why not? So she chose to have low-calorie meals, which would be prepared by a Cordon Bleu-trained chef.

After some twenty minutes, they had a schedule Elizabeth felt she could handle: three-mile walk every morning at six; breakfast delivered to her cabana; a variety of exercise classes twice a day with a personal trainer; lunch by the pool; lectures or classes; massage with her personal masseuse every afternoon; her choice of activity

(usually lying by the pool); either a facial, manicure, or body treatment; dinner; quiet time or a class or lecture; and lights out.

They both agreed the schedule had been tailor-made for all of Elizabeth's specifications. She was ready to challenge herself and be pampered and hopefully lose a few pounds in the process.

Later that afternoon, at the welcome lecture, all the new guests for the week gathered in the dining room. Fresh fruit and cold juice were stationed at the center of the long dining table, readily available for snacking.

The staff introduced themselves, and then each guest (all women) introduced themselves as well, saying a few things about their lives. As the women introduced themselves, Elizabeth realized there were a few regulars, women who came sometimes as much as four times a year. They either came alone or with friends or even with their sisters, daughters, or moms. And at \$10,000 a week! Wow.

The women in this group, about forty-five in all, were from all over the United States. There were lawyers, doctors, housewives, architects, writers, retirees, and one senator. They represented women of all shapes, sizes, colors, and ages, with one thing in common: they were there to bask in self-care.

After the gathering, some returned to the pool, others hit the gym, and some, like Elizabeth, explored the grounds. Walking slowly back to her cabana, Elizabeth passed by the immense meditation garden. It was big enough

to house, well, a house. Three large, artfully arranged boulders were surrounded by freshly raked sand. Not one footprint could be seen. Miniature bonsai trees hid in some of the crevices within the rocks. It was a serene atmosphere.

Leaning against the railing, Elizabeth pondered what the week would have in store for her. Briefly, she thought of Jack. He was not going to appreciate the news she had for him. The Door, as it was known, highly discouraged phone calls, either incoming or outgoing, unless it was an emergency. This policy was for the benefit of the guests, so they would not be disturbed. She would call him in a bit on her cell, just to give him the heads-up. Then she planned to take the advice of those who ran the place, regardless of his reaction.

Elizabeth meandered along the pathway. At the very end, near the chef's organic garden, was Elizabeth's new home for the week, a little Shinto-style bungalow. The inside was luxurious. The furnishings were simple, black lacquered, hand carved, and elegant in design—a wooden desk and chair, a large dresser and mirror, a long wooden bench at the end of the bed, and a couple of nightstands. Atop the king-size bed was a light jade-green feather bed that was covered in silk. Fat, fluffy down pillows, at least six or seven, graced the sumptuous-looking bed.

Rough ivory-colored silk spanned the walls. Two large watercolors adorned the room. The first was of an Oriental woman dressed in a kimono arranging flowers for a vase. The other, by the same artist, displayed a nubile young woman pouring tea for a ceremony. Four-foot stalks of

bird-of-paradise stood in crystal vases throughout the room.

Surprisingly, the bathroom was moderate in size. There were white subway tiles on the walls and black-and-white-checkered mosaic tiles on the floor. The black granite countertop held two sinks. On the opposite side was a combo shower and tub. A row of little windows above the sinks allowed for natural light and fresh air. Cozy, plush towels hung on the racks, alongside the spa's fragrant collection of soaps and lotions.

This would do just fine.

She opened the door of the closet and found her clothes had already been unpacked and hung up. The dresser held all her lingerie, workout clothes, and sweats. She hadn't brought any jeans or dresses, as the Door had specified exactly what to bring. Her suitcase was discreetly tucked into the side of the closet, and her satchel containing her toiletries was in a cabinet under the sink.

Elizabeth opened the sliding glass doors that overlooked the grounds, giving her a partial view of the vegetable garden and a little creek that meandered by her outdoor patio. She could hear the trickle of the water, birds chirping, crickets, and little creatures creeping about their way, crunching on the leaves as they moved through the foliage.

Gong, gong, gong! The loud sound of the brass gong reverberated throughout the property. All the guests were being called to dinner in the main building; it was six fifteen.

Elizabeth headed to the dining area, where some of the women began to assemble in small groups, chattering away, eating daintily, and making small talk. Elizabeth gravitated toward a couple of women from New York. They seemed like nice, funny women that didn't take themselves too seriously, which Elizabeth was grateful for; she wasn't in the mood for serious conversation.

The meal was delicious, but portions were slim. This was something Elizabeth would have to get used to. Her idea of a portion was very different, much larger.

After saying her good nights to her new companions, Elizabeth headed back to her cabana. Tomorrow would start early with a wake-up call at 5:45 a.m. She had time for a shower, then bed.

Shit. I should call Jack. She dialed his cell number and took a deep breath. He picked up after the first ring.

"Hi, it's me. I got here just fine."

"It's about time you called. I've been waiting all evening! How come you called so late? I was getting worried!" Jack barked.

Uh-oh. "I'm sorry! I had to check in and get settled and then do a meet and greet with the other guests *and* have dinner. Jeez, I called as soon as I could!" Elizabeth's voice was escalating.

"The kids were worried! You need to think about that, not just about yourself!"

"Really? You've got some nerve, Jack! I'm not doing anything wrong! I'm taking care of myself, *for once!* Why are you acting like this? You were fine when I left today."

“Taking care of yourself? You ran off and left me here with the kids so you could avoid your responsibilities at a spa, and an expensive one at that! *Are we Rockefellers now?*” Jack was nearly screaming.

“I’m paying for it myself. *Get over it!* By the way, no calls can be made or accepted during my stay. *Spa rules, not mine!*” She was barking now.

Jack’s voice got very low. “I’ll call when I feel like it. Fuck spa rules.” With that Jack hung up.

Chapter 10

Dear Diary,

I am exhausted! And it's only day 1. It was suggested to the guests that we write down our daily experiences in our new journals, provided by the spa. I can barely do that! But I shall oblige.

The schedule for today was insane! It's nearly seven in the evening, and I just walked in. I have asked for my dinner tray to be delivered to my room. I can't bear the thought of being social right now, no matter how nice the other ladies are!

Anyway, we started off with a three-mile hike in the forest at 6:00 a.m. My breakfast tray was delivered to my room after that. Then my chosen schedule began after that.

I think I may have overestimated the amount of workouts I can handle. I've complained before about the boot camps I've attended and the insane workouts my personal trainer puts me through at home, but those are like kindergarten compared to the Door! There is *no* way my mom would have endured any of this ...

The only saving grace was the massage I had in the afternoon! Thank God I'll be getting one every day.

There's a knock on my door ... Dinner! I'm *starved*! Night-night.

Day 2

I feel like an idiot writing "Dear Diary," so I won't.

Hard waking up at 5:27 a.m. Three-mile hike (saw red-tailed hawks, lizards, and bunnies with white cotton tails), tai chi, hair consultation, cardio kickboxing (with bags and hand wraps!), rest, massage, lunch by pool. Met with trainer and learned about muscles I never knew existed (in my lower abdomen). I hope they are sore tomorrow and all this week. Maybe it will help out that pooch I have ... although I *did* have three C-sections! I know where those muscles are now, and I'll work on them. Thank you, Ellen!

Swam in the pool, lay in the sun ... yummy! Just for a little while, though. Facial ... *yummy*! I think that was the best facial I have *ever* had! Me! I've been getting them since I was twenty-three ... I've had them all.

I sit here writing at six in the evening. I walked through the organic garden earlier. I've been trying to keep my camera with me. *Must take pictures*.

In the distance, I can hear the gong, gong, gong, gong calling us to appetizers and then dinner. (I guess it's about six fifteen now.) I hesitate, not wanting to interrupt my quiet reverie. It's time to go, though. Along the way, maybe I'll pick a blue bachelor button and put it in my hair.

Ever so slightly, I can hear a little traffic go by. I can't see it but am annoyed. I must be at the edge of the property.

Day 3

I'm beginning to adjust to my schedule ... and make a few friends. I feel good—energetic but relaxed. I'm beginning to “see” and “hear” many things. I am prospering from the daily meditations. Vision in my third eye is dilating, my sixth chakra! My seventh chakra is expanding. The top of my head feels like it's changing shape. I am used to this; it has happened many times over the years. Emily once told me that as your ability expands, so does the top of your head. It is easier for me to stay in the moment and submerge myself in the glory of the spirit. I can feel it come and go but mostly staying within me.

I'm sitting on a stone bench with my back to the spa. Hmm, wonder what that means. Maybe I need to disengage myself from the luxurious surroundings to find my writing hand under the huge old oak trees.

...

I just meandered back to my cabana. I opened the sliding glass doors to let in fresh air and Mother Nature's lullabies—crickets and frogs.

There are no TVs here, so I listen to the radio. Only a few AM stations come in clearly—not much to choose from.

It's eight thirty in the evening, and yep, I'm listening to the AM radio. :)

The talk show host is telling his audience three reasons to believe in God. Okay.

1. God is perfect in his love. God, in his love, always does what is best for us.
2. God is infinite in his wisdom. He always knows what is best for us, as he makes perfect judgments. The word of God gives us direction, so it's important to understand what he says. He doesn't have to explain why. Even if we become frustrated and can't comprehend his actions, we must trust in him and know he loves us.
3. God is in complete control of this universe. He is not affected by time. Never doubt God in his wisdom. Even when something bad happens (tragedies, deaths, plane crashes, earthquakes, etc.), we must accept his greater plan. *"We cannot know ... only he does!"*

I don't know about this show ... That last part he was nearly screaming. What *am* I listening too! Good Lord! Lights out, man ... Tomorrow is another day. Night.

Day 4

Slept in; no hike. Breakfast, tai chi, labyrinth, yoga, manicure, massage, lunch, facial. Swam in the pool and went to hypnosis class (with relaxation techniques).

I had an hour rock massage (for an extra cost but worth it!) with Hisako at seven. It was in a little hut a short

walk up the hillside above the little pool (no one is ever there, so I use it all the time ... alone—it's fabulous) on a small path ensconced in bamboo trees. The massage was an incredible experience. Hisako is a charming Japanese little person or dwarf. About fifty or sixty years old, she has been working as an energetic healer and masseuse here for over a decade and is always in high demand. You had to make an appointment with her the day of arrival, or you missed out.

As I approached the little hut, Hisako appeared before me. She bowed and welcomed me inside. A massage table sat nearby the glassless window. There was a huge boulder beside the table that had been ground down to be used as a basin. Fresh water flowed from a faucet and trickled into the basin, sounding delicate and soothing to the ear. The positive energy in the hut was palpable. It swirled around me and stirred the kundalini within me.

She placed rocks on all my chakras. My body responded with dazzling healing energy—another cosmic orgasm. She asked me to rest for a few moments. I opened my eyes to look out the window, and sitting upon the ledge was a vibrant, gleaming angel. I could see her quite clearly. White sparks fluttered around her. Her wings gently curled around her form. She was looking at me. I smiled and silently thanked her for her presence. Her light faded, and then she was gone.

I closed my eyes to relish the memory. Hisako said she would wait for me outside. I put on my robe and walked across the threshold into the early-evening light. It was sunset.

She said, “Elizabeth, I could feel your power and strength. Good luck on your healing journey. It gave me goose bumps when I saw your angel. You are a very special lady. I knew it.”

I almost cried, but I did not. I bowed to her and thanked her and began my descent back down the hillside. My lesson: don’t bullshit one way and believe in another. The environment you move around must always be truthful, even when you’re proposing an unusual or unconventional idea. Most people are afraid and feel safe in their fear. Their fear is familiar and so not frightening. Not challenging anyone to think or consider feeling a different way doesn’t assist yourself or anyone else. Open-mindedness is essential for growth and knowledge. But you must know your knowledge before teaching anyone else. To explain, to teach, to ease fears and uncertainty, where do you want me? Amen.

Later that evening, as I began to fall asleep, I saw many faces in black and white. They looked at me but did not speak.

Day 5

Just finished a meditation hike. Two miles of strenuous trails. My body responded well. At the top, there were huge cliffs of granite boulders. Our teacher/guide asked for us to stay clear of the edges. Then he led us through our tai chi class. The fog was thick, and we were unable to see the view we were told about. After, we sat on the rocks and ate our breakfast from our backpacks, which the Door provided.

Slowly we made our way back down the mountain, discussing the next activity we were about to embark upon—the labyrinth. One woman said she had walked it several times before. For her, it was a highly spiritual experience ... Then she said no more.

As we sat on tree stumps around the enormous circular form, a new guide explained that the Door's labyrinth is a replica of one of the most famous labyrinths in the world, in Chartres, France. There is not a lot of information about why the first labyrinth was created, but some believe it was a way to pray and pay homage to the gods. The first is to have been created around AD 1000.

The one in France was built beside an Episcopalian church because most people in that day could not make pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The distance from Europe was treacherous and expensive, and you never knew if you'd make it back home. In order to satisfy this need, a labyrinth was developed as a substitute. All could use it. All could pay their respects, and it was easily found next to the church.

But around 1792, when the French Revolution was in full swing, the labyrinths were covered. The one inside the church, made of tapestry, was covered with chairs. One could still see it but could not walk it. The other, outside, was covered in dirt and rockery.

My group of five was invited to walk the circuitous path. I was last and glad for it. This was all new to me.

"Follow the maze, but walk very slowly. Give the person in front and behind you lots of space. Open your mind and your heart and listen to what your intuition tells you," our guide instructed.

When everyone was finished, we sat upon the tree stumps once again.

“You are all invited to share your experiences tonight after dinner,” our guide said, “but feel free to sit here as long as you like.” With that, she left.

No much long after, so did I. Maybe I did it wrong ... not sure. But honestly, I didn’t get much out of it. I was too distracted by the other people, distracted by their energy. I’ll try again later—by myself.

Last Entry

As I write this, the night before we depart, I am sitting outside in my usual spot close to the chef’s garden. I am relaxed after my final massage with Olivia. The chef is picking through the plants—pulling up zucchinis, clipping off chives, snipping the Roma tomatoes from the tomato-cage supports. He is slowly filling his basket with delicious, fresh ingredients for our last dinner tonight. How quickly it has come to an end.

A red-tailed hawk just flew over me and sat upon the branch of a nearby oak tree, about twenty yards or so away. He squawked loudly, many, many times. What message is coming for me? He pooped, squawked some more, and flew away. What the hell was that?

I did try the labyrinth once again, alone. Early one morning, I passed on the three-mile hike and went directly to the secluded wooded area. I knew I’d be alone and undisturbed.

I walked slowly, eyes closed, opening up my channels and praying to the divine and the angels for wisdom they could share with me. After a while I looked down and realized I had stepped out of the labyrinth. Where was I? This area did *not* look familiar at all! Good Lord! I was lost. Panic set in, and tears began to flow. *Wait. Stop and calm yourself. Breathe*, I thought.

“Roderick, Roderick, Roderick, I call upon you for guidance and help. Please come by my side ...”

I could not see him but heard the familiar British accent. “My lady, all is well. You are not lost. Walk toward the clearing.”

I did as I was told and could see the labyrinth in the distance.

He then said, “When the ego and godly consciousness become aware of each other, the ego knows it. It will create fears, fight against godliness, and create great havoc within the individual. The ego knows it can be usurped; it can waver. Indeed, ego versus godly consciousness is a battle for the individual. Being made aware that this godly consciousness exists, the ego will fight even harder for control, which makes for an exceedingly unhappy person. If the individual is made aware of a more peaceful existence but continues to choose fear, he or she will never obtain inner peace. It will always be out of reach. Walk in your truth. Do not hide. All will be well.”

I headed back to my cabana with a lighter heart. I quickened my step so that I would not be late for my appointment for reflexology treatment with Alma. I was looking forward to the treatment. It was not inclusive in the

program, but I had been intrigued by what Alma had told me about the treatment the day she'd given me a mani-pedi. So I'd booked it.

Alma came to my bungalow right on time. A sweet-faced, middle-aged Philippine woman, Alma had been with the Door for over a decade. She was highly sought out for her healing treatments using the hands and feet. Oftentimes, wealthy clients would fly her to their homes for her treatments. It was rumored that some of her clients were celebrities.

She asked me to lie down on the bed, face up. She then began pressing and pushing all the areas around my feet. While doing so, she explained the process of how reflexology works. Everyone has nerve endings in their feet and hands—called meridians—that serve to tell the brain what is happening to the body. For example, you put a hand or foot in hot water, and the nerves send a message to your brain saying what is happening. The brain processes the message and sends back down the same nerve, “Hey, it’s too hot. Take your hand/foot out of the water.” If your nerves are open, you pull your hand/foot out. But if you have an injury or a blocked nerve, the corresponding body part does not get the message—hence, pain, muscle tension, and inability to move muscles. (Me, I couldn’t turn my neck very far on either side, and my right rotator cuff hurt.) Alma had asked me if I had pain in these areas at my mani-pedi in the beginning of the week.

As she pressed and moved my foot around, she said I had inflammation in my bladder and also my colon. Hmm.

I sat up and showed her how far I could turn my neck on either side, which wasn't far, and I could barely move my right shoulder.

She said, "I have some tools that I will use to release the nerves that are blocked. It may hurt a little bit."

"What tools?"

She said they had been in her family for generations and were used only for healing. She put them in my hand to examine. Nothing scary. A rounded piece of wood that looked like a fat pencil with a rounded end and another piece of wood that looked like an old-fashioned juice reamer.

As she worked the pencil up and down my foot, she first pressed easily and then pressed harder and harder. I almost told her to stop. I was starting to hurt ... and I'm pretty tough.

In an instant, tingles went up my back. A *whoosh* flowed through my body, like blood was surging through. Unbelievable. I kept asking her if that was how I was supposed to feel. She kept reassuring me, "Yes, yes." My face was flush.

She had me sit up and move my neck from side to side. I swear I could move it way farther than I had before. Unbelievable! I was amazed. The tension was gone. I felt lighter. I babbled on and on as she moved to my hands.

Working with the other tool, she pressed and poked and made small circular movements over and over, going harder and harder. I finally said, "Ouch, that's really hurting me."

"Just a bit more, and your shoulder will be better ..."

Again I sat up, and I moved my shoulder round and round, unlike I could before. I was overwhelmed. This truly worked! Unreal.

She finished up with my bladder and colon, pinching and massaging the area under my ankle bone. Honestly, my elimination systems were grateful. No more pain the next day. A weight had been lifted off my body. No more pain or discomfort. Healing.

...

I just got back from our final activities of the week. After a delicious dinner and a single glass of wine (alcohol of any kind was not allowed), we were given ceremonial robes to wear to the releasing ceremony. We returned to our rooms to change and met again at the labyrinth. At the center of the labyrinth was a fire pit with a massive fire, with one of the groundskeepers tending to the huge logs.

The sky was pitch black, except for the stars that shone brightly above, no city lights nearby to obstruct their brilliance. We all sat upon the tree stumps in a circle around the fire. I felt a little bit of sadness as I watched the others around me. It had been a glorious week. My body and soul had been pampered in ways that I never could have imagined. The divine always seems to have far better surprises for us than we ever could have expected.

I was brought back to the fireside from my night dreaming as our MC for the night welcomed us. She had been one of the head teachers during the week. She was well liked.

Many things were said; many thoughts and feelings shared by the women who had spent a remarkable week

there at the Gilded Door. As a final farewell, we were asked to do two things:

1. Write down (on the stationery being passed around) all the things we wished to release from our hearts. Write down everything we wanted to say good-bye to forever. We did so.
2. After we were excused tonight, we were to write a letter to ourselves (with the additional stationery given to us). We were to write about our experiences here, things we had learned, etc. We were to bring our letters to checkout the next day, and the letters would be mailed to us in six months, to remind us of the wonderful things we had learned and experienced and see if we were still applying them to our lives.

The flames of the fire were even higher now, as the groundskeeper had been stoking the logs. He sat back into the shadows, invisible.

I could feel the heat on my face as I wrote down what I wanted to liberate from my life. I used both sides of the paper. We folded our papers into small bundles and got in line for the labyrinth. We were to walk it with the intention of letting go. At the center, we would drop our papers into the fire pit and release these burdens forever.

After some time, it was my turn. I opened my channels and was ready to receive, ready to release. As I walked each step, slowly, I let go of all the fears, past hurts, unforgiveness, anxiety, anger, frustrations, and betrayals

that I had clutched on to for so long. Release ... release ... release. I recalled back the shards of energy I had given away to others and filled myself with all the love the universe had to offer. My kundalini energy blasted its way along my spine, electrifying me. I dropped my paper into the fire with a gargantuan smile upon my face.

Done.

I can't really remember how I made it back to my room. I may have even floated. :)

I opened the sliding glass doors for the final night of nature's symphony. I sat at the little writing desk I had moved over to those doors and composed a letter to myself as instructed—a letter of tenderness, encouragement, and compassion. I licked the envelope closed and placed it on top of my packed bags near the door.

I turned the radio on one last time. I found a station playing a live symphonic piano concert. Sitting back at the desk, I listened to the soothing music. I'm not sure how long I sat there, maybe hours. I thought about my week, about my life, about my future. I want to live authentically. I want to be the woman I am supposed to be ... not hiding.

In that moment, in the wee hours of the morning, I made my decision. It's now or never. Time to open the door, cross the threshold, and walk out of the spiritual closet.

Chapter 11

Three days after getting the tattoo, it still hurt like a bitch. It looked identical to the garnet cross Elizabeth had brought in to Mark. It was beginning to look amazing. The colors were vibrant, even though there was a little bit of bloody crust still on the edges. It was good-sized too—four inches by three. It was something to get used to. The placement was perfect—on the lower part of her back, right above the first chakra.

Jack did not know about it yet. Elizabeth figured the time would come soon. In the meantime, she went to work, prayed at the chapel, and did the things she usually did. She was proud that she had gone through with the tattoo. It was her body, her right, and the right thing for her to do. It represented a new phase of her life, a spiritual awakening. It did not matter what others thought, only God. She realized that, in time, he would reveal his plan for her, for the rest of her life. She believed in the glory of God, in truth, in love, in goodness and justice.

Enough time had passed that Elizabeth was ready to follow the instructions to complete her shaktipat experience. All the students had been given instructions

and proper recitations of various mantras on a CD. Elizabeth played the CD one day when she was home alone and not be disrupted. She listened intently and wrote down every detail. She repeated the mantras to familiarize herself with the pronunciations, because all of them were in Hindi.

She then collected the things she would need for the next day. There would be plenty of time after work to make it to the beach and back home before anyone in her family would worry.

Making her way on the familiar Highway 92 toward Miranda Beach, Elizabeth replayed the CD in her car. It was soothing to hear Shri Ma's chanting. She joined in, hoping to get the sounds just right. She could nearly feel the presence of her guru as she parked at the deserted beach.

She opened the trunk, looking around as she did so. The coast was pretty clear. One woman was frolicking with her two dogs at the south end of the shore, nothing for Elizabeth to concern herself over. She pulled out the two roses (dried now) and the coconut and slammed the trunk shut. Walking down the rocky path to the sand, Elizabeth thought about how much she enjoyed the subtle energy flowing from these things she held in her hands. It was almost a shame to let them go. But rules were rules. They must be followed to ensure maximum benefit from shaktipat.

She sat upon the sand to collect her thoughts, making sure she was clear on her intentions. She looked once

more down the beach to check exactly where the woman and the dogs were and looked back at the sky. It was late afternoon; the sun would set in an hour or so. It was time.

Holding the three items, she walked out ankle-deep into the water. The tide was out, and the gentle waves lapped at her feet. Elizabeth recited a prayer, holding the items close to her chest, to her heart chakra, as the words flowed over them. Then, as hard as she could, she flung everything into the water. She bowed to the north, south, east, and west, sending out her intentions to the universe.

As she collected her purse, she noticed the woman was watching her. The woman smiled and waved. Elizabeth waved back as she headed back up the rocky path to her car. Elizabeth turned around once more, only to see the beach was empty.

“You did *what*?”

Elizabeth repeated it.

“Oh my God, woman! I can’t believe it ... You are one crazy girl!” Lee chuckled.

“It doesn’t feel crazy ...” Elizabeth got a little defensive.

“Oh, honey ... you know I support what you do ... I’m sorry. It just caught me by surprise; that’s all.” Lee gave her friend a hug.

“Ouch!”

Lee quickly pulled back from the hug. “God! Did I hurt you?” Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

Elizabeth laughed a little bit. “No, I’m just messing with ya.”

“Brat!” Lee laughed too. “Let me see it ... Can I please?”

Elizabeth turned around and gently pulled down the elastic waistband on her black skirt. The tattoo was still a little tender, but it was healing according to schedule.

“Wow! That is awesome. Does it hurt?”

“It’s still a little tender, but it’s healing pretty well.”

“What does Jack think?”

“Um, well ... he doesn’t know yet.” Elizabeth winced at this last bit.

Looking Elizabeth directly in the eye, gently shaking her head, Lee said, “Hon, you need to tell him right away. I’m saying this as your BFF.”

Elizabeth looked away. “I’m planning on telling him tonight.” She was.

“Whatever happens, call me anytime, day or night. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Lee. It’ll be okay. I did this for a reason. I believe in all that I’m doing, wholeheartedly.”

“I know, I know. Look, I’m not judging you. Just ... be careful when you tell him. Have you thought about how you’re going to do it?” Lee’s face was filled with concern. Based on everything Elizabeth had told her up to this point, Jack wasn’t going to take it well, not by a long shot. Jack, in her opinion, was a nice, hardworking guy. He had always been really good to Elizabeth, but he and Elizabeth hadn’t been getting along for quite some time now.

Elizabeth sat down on the couch and took a sip of the green tea Lee had just brewed. It was delicious.

“I don’t tell you enough how much I appreciate our friendship,” Elizabeth said. “I do appreciate it.”

“Oh, hon, I love you too.”

“Love you back. I think everything is going to be okay. All is well. I’m not worried about Jack. What can he do? It’s done.”

Lee nodded, listening.

Elizabeth said very softly, “I’ve been following a path. One door opens, and I cross the threshold. Another door opens, and I cross that threshold. This was just one more. I love my family. I love my husband. But ... at what point do we allow ourselves to become overshadowed? Where do we draw the line? I am an individual, pursuing who I really am. Doesn’t God want us to be authentic? To be happy in our own skin? Not afraid to look at our own reflection in the mirror every morning?”

Lee watched her friend releasing her previously unspoken fears.

Elizabeth smirked. “Sorry—I’ll step down from the pulpit ...”

“No worries. We need each other for venting ... right?” She smiled. “Do you want something stronger than that mug of tea? I’ve got some really great merlot.”

“No ... thanks anyway. I’m gonna need to be as clearheaded as possible. But maybe tomorrow? I’ll probably *really* need it then.”

“The bar will be open tomorrow too.”

Elizabeth got up and walked over to the kitchen to place her mug by the sink.

“I mean it, you know,” Lee said. “If you need to call me at two or three in the morning ... you’d better. I’ll probably be up anyway ... You know how I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“How’s your neck doing? I’ve been a little full of myself lately; I haven’t even asked you.”

“I’m thinking of getting the cortisone shot. I just hate doing it, though. That stuff stays in your system for years.” She shuddered at the thought.

“Yeah, that’s true, but if you get relief from it ...” Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders.

“Tom thinks I should just do it and get it over with. I think he’s getting tired of my bitching.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Good. Always working ... He’s thinking of hiring a night manager for the restaurant. Business has been pretty good lately. I’m not complaining about the extra money ... but I *never* see him. It sucks. What’s the point of making all that money if you don’t spend it together, right?” It was an ongoing argument between the two. Things could always be worse.

Elizabeth gave Lee a final hug good-bye and promised she would call if things got too heated between her and Jack.

In bed that night, Elizabeth closed her book and placed it on the nightstand. She prayed quietly for a moment before she spoke to her husband beside her.

“I have to talk to you about something, Jack.”

He turned over to face her.

Calmly, Elizabeth told Jack about the tattoo she had gotten a few days before. She told him why she’d gotten it, how it was a representation of a spiritual awakening.

He listened. Then he crumpled, putting his hands over his face. Elizabeth thought he might be silently crying. He was very quiet and said nothing. Turning his back to her, he placed a pillow over his head. She waited.

After about ten minutes or so, she asked, "Do you want to talk?"

"No! I am in shock!"

Neither slept very well that night. A storm was brewing; Elizabeth could feel it. Like all things, she'd have to deal with it when it came.

In the morning, Jack left before Elizabeth had wakened.

Later, in the early evening, as soon as Jack came home from work, he began screaming that there was smoke in the house. Elizabeth had lit a fire in the fireplace. One of the logs was a little wet and had begun to smoke. The smoke detectors went off, and Jack shrieked as he opened the windows and doors. His shrieks, along with the piercing sound of the smoke detectors, gave Elizabeth a headache.

The sounds finally stopped. The smoke had cleared, but the tensions had not. The storm had arrived, right there in the great room. Both kids were out, which Elizabeth was grateful for.

Quietly, Elizabeth asked, "Are you not going to talk to me?"

"I probably have AIDS now. I don't want to die because of you!"

"Jack! Listen to me. Everything was sterilized. The packages of paints were opened in front of me. There

were mirrors all around, so I could see exactly what he was doing. I sat backward in an upright chair; only my lower back was exposed. I didn't have my clothes off; I held my shirt around my waist and had elastic-waist pants on that didn't even show my crack." Elizabeth kept her voice steady. "I checked the place out beforehand; I made sure everything looked legit. It was clean and looked safe and artistic. I went by three different times to check on everything. I was satisfied."

Jack shook his head back and forth as she spoke, his face angry. "I am so hurt! Why didn't you ask me to get the tattoo? *Why?* You didn't even talk to me about it. What if you do have AIDS because of the needles and blood? I don't want to die! I hate all this healing crap you've been getting into. I don't understand it! What are you doing? Are you in a cult or something? Brainwashed? Jesus Christ!"

They were standing in the middle of the kitchen now, the granite island between them. The sides had been chosen. Elizabeth was not going to budge this time.

"Look, I'm sorry you don't understand, really. I can explain anything to you. Just ask."

"Well, I'm not having sex with you unless you get an AIDS test."

"What? Are you kidding me! Look, we haven't had sex since I got this. I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Forget this! You've turned into a freak! You think you're a healer? You're an idiot! I can't handle this." He moved out of the kitchen toward the table that had his car keys on it. He was leaving.

“You know, it seems every time things get challenging, you just bolt! All you want to do is control and manipulate me! When things don’t go your way or how you think they should, you scam. You don’t want to die? *Really?* Because what shape do you think your liver is in? I’ll get an HIV test after *you* go to AA meetings for a month. You *jerk!*”

“I’m leaving!”

She ignored this comment. “If you can’t have a say, then it’s all bad. If you don’t understand, it’s all bad. Tough shit, Jack. It’s done. If you want to leave, fine. Leave. I don’t care anymore!”

And with that, she walked by him and went downstairs. She heard the front door slam shut.

Elizabeth sat on their bed, staring out the French doors into the black night. She’d known this wasn’t going to be easy, and it sure as hell wasn’t. *I’m going to keep plodding through step by step, and by God, I will keep going*, she thought. *I will follow my destiny.*

Jack started his truck with a roar of the engine. As he drove down the street like a mad man, his mind whirled with all the things he and Elizabeth had just said. He was afraid. How could she have done that to herself? To him? How had things gotten so far out of hand? She was different.

He pulled into the parking lot of the nearby grocery store. He needed to calm down. Sitting in his truck, watching people come and go out of the grocery store, he thought about his wife. He did love her, always would. But now, she *was* different.

They had practically grown up together. He'd fallen in love with her when she'd been just a little girl, maybe eight or nine years old. He wasn't really sure, since they had known each other since they'd been three and five. She had been beautiful with her long, shiny hair and her big hazel eyes and dimples. She had been different from the other girls, special.

The summer he had fallen for her, so many years ago, he had been visiting his cousins. His parents had gone on a trip to Hawaii and left him, his brothers, and his sister at their aunt and uncle's house. His aunt and uncle had four kids too. After dinner, every night, the kids on the block would come out to play—hide-and-seek, tag football, roller-skating, bike riding, anything to be outside.

One Saturday night, a group of the kids went up to the church hall, where they could buy candy because of the bingo game going on. There was a concession booth that sold everything. It was heaven.

Elizabeth, one of the neighbor kids, was trying to make a decision between a Big Hunk, a Heath toffee bar, an Abba-Zaba, or a Lik-M-Aid Fun Dip. "I don't know what I want. What are you getting, Jack?" Elizabeth asked.

"Uh, maybe a 100 Grand Bar. I dunno, not sure yet." He walked away. He liked her and didn't want her to know it.

The kids bought their stuff and headed out of the smoke-filled hall. Emma, one of Jack's cousins, was last out the door. As she was about to let the door close behind her, she and Elizabeth screamed, "*Bingo!*" to the room.

Laughing, all the kids ran away with their candy stuffed in their pockets.

Back on the block, as they all sat on the sidewalk, feet in the gutter, munching on chocolate, licorice, and jelly beans, it was decided that they should play hide-and-seek tonight.

“Okay, so you can’t hide any farther down than the Fitzpatrick’s house, no higher up than the Barnes’ house, and no backyard hiding ...” Lonnie, Emma’s older sister, said, making sure there would be no cheating.

All honked up on sugar, they played for two hours. Then parents started to call their kids in for the night. Dickie Barnes’s mom used a cowbell to call him in. Everyone always laughed when she did it. “Moo ... moo ... moo,” they’d say. Dickie would stick his tongue out and give them all the finger.

“Liizzzy ... time to come in,” Victoria called from the front porch.

“Gotta go ... I’ll see you guys tomorrow?” Elizabeth asked Jack and his siblings.

“Nah, our mom and dad are coming to get us; they’re back from Hawaii,” Jack said.

“Oh, okay, well, see ya later.” Elizabeth walked away.

“Hey, wait up!” Jack trotted over to her just before she crossed her front lawn. “Here ...” He handed over a half-melted Heath bar.

Elizabeth, shocked, had accepted the chocolate from him. “Wow, thanks!”

“Yeah, no big deal ... See ya.” Jack had turned on his heel and run back to the small group of kids across the street. It had been the first gift Jack had ever given her.

Jack had been sitting in the parking lot for a long time now. There weren't as many cars now, and very few people were going in and out. What should he do? The thought washed over him again and again.

He was tired from a long, hard day working with tools. All he wanted to do was go home and go to bed. He needed to talk to someone, a person he could trust to be honest about his marriage. *Victoria?* he thought. *Maybe she can talk some sense into Elizabeth. Nah, she just got out of the hospital with back surgery. Grady? No, he's too busy nursing Victoria back to health. He's got enough on his plate.*

Jack opened his wallet and took out the business card with their marriage counselor's number on it. It was late, but he called her nonemergency line anyway. Her voice mail came on, and he left a message. "Bonnie? This is Jack Warren. My wife, Elizabeth, and I were seeing you a few months ago. Anyway, I wanted to make an appointment with you for myself only. Could you call me back when you have a chance? Thanks. Bye."

Done. Maybe Bonnie could help him sort out this mess.

He turned on the engine, pulled out of the parking lot, and drove home. He was going to sleep in the guest room tonight, regardless of what the kids thought.

Elizabeth heard the front door open and shut. She knew it had to be Jack. Justin and Molly had come back from the library a couple of hours ago and had gone to bed.

She heard his steps go down the hallway and into the guest bedroom and then heard the door shut.

Okay, that's fine. He won't be bothering me tonight.

Jack sat across from Bonnie in her office. They made small talk about his work and business, something Bonnie was always interested in. Her husband was in construction too.

“So how have you been, Jack?” Bonnie finally asked.

“Not so good. Elizabeth and I have been fighting a lot. She went and got herself a tattoo without even saying a word to me. I’m really disappointed in her.”

“A tattoo? Well, they seem to be popular now, I guess. Why do you think she felt she needed to keep it a secret?”

“She’s on some kick. She seems to think she’s a healer ... or an energy person. Honestly, Bonnie, I thought that this was maybe just a phase that she was going through and that it would be over by now.”

“An energy healer?”

“Yes, that’s it ... What does that mean?”

“Well, when I studied Eastern religions in India, energy healers were part of the culture. Actually, many countries embrace them.” Bonnie wrote a few notes down in her notebook.

“She’s tried to explain things to me, but I don’t buy it. Some woman named Emily has been teaching her for a long time, years. I read some notebooks Elizabeth had hidden.”

“Jack, that’s a breach of trust between you two. We’ve worked on that in the past.”

“Yeah, I know. I was afraid she was getting mixed up with some bad people. I felt I had the right as her husband.”

“As your marriage counselor, I recommend against doing that in the future.”

“Look, I *really* don’t know how to handle this. She’s been a pretty strong Catholic in the past. That’s what gets

me. Why is she going outside of the church to learn stuff from someone who might be taking advantage of her?"

"Well, Elizabeth is not here to explain for herself. Maybe you should approach her, calmly, in a setting where you won't be disturbed, and ask her. Or you both could come here to discuss these concerns. It sounds like Elizabeth is going deeper into herself to explore her spirituality. Is she threatening you in any way?"

"Not really. I mean, she hasn't been chopping off chicken heads or anything."

Bonnie smiled at the humor and asked, "Is she treating the kids any differently? Threatening them in any way?"

"Well ... no, I guess not."

"Maybe you just need to hear her out. Give her a chance to thoroughly explain what she's doing. It seems that there's been a lot secrecy between the two of you. Get everything out in the open. It may be a big relief for both of you," Bonnie said. "The key word here is *listen*. Just like the exercises we worked on last year, she gets her turn, and then you get yours. Okay?"

He was quiet for a moment. Their time was up.

"Would you like to make another appointment?" Bonnie asked.

"No, not yet. I think I'm going to talk to Elizabeth."

Bonnie smiled. "Good. If you need to talk, just call."

Jack put out his hand to shake hers. "I'll keep in touch. Thanks again, Bonnie. This helped."

"I'm glad."

Jack walked out of the office feeling better than he had in a long time. There was hope after all.

Chapter 12

Elizabeth was meeting Emily at her new office. It was a perfect location, right beside some little shops and popular restaurants.

Elizabeth walked up the short flight of stairs, turned left, and found room 212. She knocked.

“Hi! C’mon in!” Emily called.

Elizabeth gave her a hug and then stepped back to look around.

“Welcome! Let me show you around.”

Elizabeth put her purse down on the white wicker chair, the same one she had always sat on. “I love it, Em! It’s perfect!”

“I know, isn’t it? Meant to be.”

They looked at each other and smiled.

The office was a studio, one large room with a fireplace, a huge picture window that faced the ocean, and a large bathroom, complete with shower. Emily had her desk at the far end. The healing/massage table was beside one wall, near the fireplace. On the mantle sat some of Emily’s most prized crystals. There was a bookshelf loaded with books and CDs on the opposite wall, and in front of that

was the little white wicker table, chairs, and love seat she'd had at Blessings. Her altar was directly below the picture window, and a huge, fluffy fern stood over in the corner. Her watercolors and prints were already on the walls. That was Emily, things in order, right away.

"I was going to offer to help you unpack, but you beat me to it," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, it wasn't that much stuff. Besides, my husband helped me yesterday. We got it done in no time at all."

"This place suits you. Is the rent crazy expensive?"

"Not really. The landlord wanted to fill the space quickly, so it worked out well." Emily motioned to the chairs and said, "Come sit down ... Let's catch up."

They chatted for a while, and then Emily changed the subject. "I was thinking you could start bringing your clients here. You could use the office on the days that I work at the hospital. I'll give you my schedule."

"Oh, God, Em ... *really*? That would be awesome! I'd want to give you something toward the rent, though."

"You don't have to, not right now. When you build up your client base, then that'll be fine."

"I don't know. I mean, if I'm using the space, I should put in something!"

"Look, don't worry about it now. We'll figure it out in the near future. Okay?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Okay!"

They spoke about holding a group meditation at the office. Shri Ma encouraged the students to gather for meditations. The positive energy emanating from a group was stronger than with just one or two people.

“Jeez, I just realized I should have some business cards made up,” Elizabeth said. “Maybe a brochure too.”

“That’s a great idea! Take one of mine so you can get an idea of what you want to do. Oh, almost forgot: you should apply for a business license. It’s pretty easy. You just go down to city hall and fill out some forms. The fire department will come to check the space out ... standard procedure. If everything is in order, which I’m sure it will be, they’ll send you a license in the mail. You can post it next to mine.”

“Oh, okay. Jeez, I didn’t realize it’s a lot of prep work.”

“Yeah, it seems like a lot, but we want to run a legit business ... right?”

“Absolutely!”

Elizabeth looked at her watch and realized that she had spent far more time here than she’d meant to. “Sweetie, I gotta go ... I’ll call you at the end of the week ... touch base.”

“I’ll get you a card key for the door and give it to you the next time I see you,” Emily said with a smile.

Elizabeth nodded, smiled back, and gave Emily a big hug. “I have some work to do, but this is really gonna happen!”

“Yep, it’s really gonna happen, Elizabeth.”

Driving home, Elizabeth was elated. Her mind was in a whirlwind of excitement. She knew just the place to go for her cards and brochures. Then she’d have to make another trip to Half Moon Bay to city hall and the fire department to make an appointment for the safety-code inspection.

One thing was for certain: she needed to sit down and talk with Jack, get everything out in the open, *all of it*. She would never really be free until she did.

When Elizabeth pulled up to the house, Jack's truck was there. She sat in her car for a moment to gather her thoughts, her words. Breathing deeply to clear any fear from her body, she opened the garage door and pulled her little black car in.

Lucy greeted her at the door, tail wagging, tongue hanging out, looking for a hug or a pat on the head.

"Hey, Luce, how was your day?"

Slobber, slobber, slobber on Elizabeth's leg.

Hearing the TV on some news channel, Elizabeth knew Jack was probably sitting on the couch with a beer. She came to the top of the stairs and looked down to the great room. He was there, sitting on the couch and watching the news ... but no beer. Interesting. Elizabeth's red flag went up.

"Oh, you're home ..." Jack said. "I already ate. Molly is in her room doing homework, and Just went to Ryan's for band practice."

"Hi. Um, okay." Elizabeth wasn't sure what was going on. Jack hit the mute button on the TV, and Elizabeth looked up from putting her things down on the dining room table.

"I was hoping to talk to you about some things ..." Jack said. "Maybe after work tomorrow we could meet somewhere?"

"Okay, now you're freaking me out, Jack. What on God's green earth is going on?"

"I want to talk ... just not around the kids; that's all."

She walked over to him and sat at the other end of the couch. "What's happening here? Is this about divorce or something? You're shocking me. No beer, you're talking calmly ... I'm surprised."

"God, Elizabeth, give me some credit. I'm trying here ... Cut me a break."

"Okay, I can see that ... I'm sorry. Well, it's funny that you brought this up, because I want to talk to you too ..."

The silence was palatable. Elizabeth looked at the TV and could see the anchorwoman was talking, though the sound was still muted. Pictures of a traffic accident flashed on the screen behind the anchorwoman. Still quiet.

"Are we putting our swords down?" Elizabeth asked with a smirked. It was a joke they made with each other when they were ready to act like adults.

"Yeah."

"Molly is sleeping over at Moira's house tomorrow night, and Justin is going to Ryan's again. Do you want to talk then?"

"Okay. After work, though; I've got a full day tomorrow."

"Done." Elizabeth got up and headed to the kitchen. It was to be a light dinner, a bath, then bed.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

Showing two units that were up for rent took up most of Elizabeth's day. Open houses were always like that. Handing out applications and answering potential renters' questions was her bread and butter. One never knew who was serious and who was just a lookie-loo.

Eventually it was time to close up shop. Looking at her watch, she figured she'd have enough time to stop off at the chapel before she was to meet Jack. If ever there was a time to pray, it was now.

The chapel was quiet today. Sitting in her favorite spot, she began her prayers. Once her channels were opened up, she slipped into a meditative state. After asking some questions and receiving guidance, she was certain she was ready to face her husband. It was time.

Normally, Jack drove home listening to talk radio and maybe stopping off to grab a quick beer at a buddy's house but not today. This was going to be a very serious talk, perhaps one of the most important he and his wife would ever have. Their future depended upon the outcome.

On the drive home from the city, he thought about their kids, their marriage ... their lives, so entwined. From the moment they'd started officially dating, at fourteen and sixteen, they had hitched their futures together immeasurably. They had always been making plans, talking about "When we're old and gray, we'll ..."

It was almost impossible to imagine what life would be like without her. In the end, it was Elizabeth and the family they had created together through blood, sweat, and tears that made him think twice.

Elizabeth's car was in the driveway as he pulled up to the front of their house. Checking the mailbox, he was happy to see only one bill and a check from an investment firm he and Elizabeth had gotten into a while back. Good start to the night.

Opening the front door, he could smell beef stew cooking in the Crock-Pot. At least the dinner would be good.

Elizabeth was sitting at the dining room table working on her laptop.

“Hi,” he said.

Elizabeth looked up from her screen. “Hi,” she said with a light smile on her face.

Jack tossed the mail and then his keys down on the table. He pulled out a chair and sat. “So ... are either of the kids here?”

“Nope.”

“So what’s been happening here?” he asked.

“Um, what?”

“Are we gonna talk or what?”

“So you’re just going to launch into this, then?”

“Yeah. Haven’t we been dancing around all this bullshit long enough?”

“I suppose so. Look, first of all, I want to know if you’ve been drinking, because if so, we’re not having a conversation about anything ... I’m tired of wasting my breath.”

Jack smirked, looked away, then looked back at her. “No, I have not. Quit stalling, Elizabeth. Why have you decided to become a so-called healer? What are you getting out of it? Are you making any money? Have you—”

“Hold it. We’re not going get very far if this becomes an interrogation. I’m not on trial here. I’m happy to answer your questions as long as we act like adults. Okay?”

They were both tired of the war of the Warrens.

“Okay,” Jack said. “So can you answer my questions? Please.”

Elizabeth did. She told him her story right from the very beginning, when she had first met Emily Gordon at Blessings so many years ago. She explained how Emily had helped her stop smoking, helped her resolve rifts in the family, taught her to meditate, trained her to harness energy to heal others—so many things that had improved Elizabeth’s life in immeasurable ways.

Jack listened. Many of the questions that had resided in the back of his mind for years were being answered—just by listening.

She told him about the people she’d worked on, the clearings, shaktipat, why she’d gotten the tattoo—all of it. She even mentioned the business opportunity Emily was offering, a chance to share an office space with her mentor/teacher/friend and now business partner.

The house had become dim, and the sunlight was fading outside.

“I have to say ... I ... I’m not sure what to say,” Jack said. “I have noticed that after your ... sessions with this Emily, you were ... I don’t know ... happier? Calmer? Reasonable and not all PMSing ...”

Elizabeth made a face. “PMSing? Really?”

“You know what I mean. I’m not the best talker, Elizabeth; you know that ...”

“Okay, fair enough.” She said, “I know this hasn’t been easy for you, Jack—the hiding, the secrecy, the lying. But you made things very hard for me too, you know, like always cutting me down if I mentioned something about

what I was learning or making fun of me in front of the kids. What did you expect? What hurt me even more was you talking to Charlotte behind my back, confiding in her. That was not her job as our daughter. You put her in a very awkward position. Bonnie even said that in one of our sessions.”

“You were hanging around people that seemed, to me, flaky. I was afraid you were being brainwashed by freaks and being taken advantage of ...” He spread his hands out to emphasize his point.

“Good God! I am a college-educated woman who has successfully managed to keep a career and establish my own trust while raising a family ... I’d say I’m a pretty wise woman.”

“I’m trying to wrap my head around all this. It hasn’t been easy for me either. One day you’re my Elizabeth, whom I’ve known my entire life; the next, you’re telling me about readings and healing energy and ... the tattoo ... God, that blew my mind! Do you understand how that might feel?”

She hesitated. “No, I guess not. I’ve tried to explain things, though ...”

“Yeah, well, I’m a traditional guy ... Cut me some slack.”

They stopped talking for a bit, each imagining being in the other person’s shoes.

Elizabeth looked Jack straight in the eye. “I’m so sorry, Jack. Please forgive me.”

He hesitated for a split second. “Okay ... Yes. Okay, apology accepted. I’m sorry too.”

He added, "I want you to know that I've decided to cut out the beer. Maybe I'll still have an occasional glass of wine at dinner ..." He trailed off.

"I've noticed. I'm proud of you. Your tummy is getting smaller too." She smiled.

"You *are* a wise woman ... and I support you in whatever you want. But I'm not interested in meeting Emily ... at least not for a while."

Those were compromises they both could work around.

"Oh, Jack, thank you." She moved around the table and gave him a loving embrace. She kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, Jack."

He held her tightly, inhaled deeply to enjoy her scent, and kissed her on the lips. "I love you too. I guess you need to do what you need to do."

"Yes, I need to do what I need to do."

"You encouraged and supported me when George and I went into business, even though we barely had a dime."

"Yep. I believed in you. I knew you could do it. Look at you now." She smiled her dimpled smile. It was so good to feel such freedom—the lightness, the peace.

The war of the Warrens was over.

Chapter 13

After a couple of months, Elizabeth had settled in at the office with Emily.

After much hedging, Emily had finally agreed to accept a small amount of money toward the rent. “It’s only fair, Em,” Elizabeth had said. “I would feel much better about the whole situation here.”

Elizabeth wanted to put energy of her own into her new business venture. She walked the streets of Half Moon Bay asking other business owners to place her business cards and brochures on their counters or in their windows. She walked the downtown streets of her own hometown and did the same. She also mailed letters of introduction, with offerings of group workshops and group readings.

Business was slow, but Elizabeth understood it would take time to build her client base. She was finally starting to get a good response, though.

Emily and Elizabeth were holding their very first workshop in a private home in San Jose. A woman had hired them to teach her Presbyterian church group about energy healing and angels and give some readings. Emily

and Elizabeth were delighted. Emily had experience with group workshops; Elizabeth did not. She was thrilled and terrified all at the same time.

The morning of the workshop, Elizabeth was a lightning bolt of energy. All morning long, her hands had been feeling warm, pulsating and ready for healing. She experienced this sensation each time she was to give an energy healing.

While getting ready, she was blow-drying her hair and trying to calm her nerves, not thinking about anything in particular. Suddenly the hair dryer popped, sparked, and started smoking in her hand.

“What was that?” she shouted, dropping the hair dryer in the sink. “Oh no! Jack, come here!”

He came into the bathroom and saw the smoking hair dryer. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“I don’t know ... I was blow-drying my hair, and it popped and sparked ...” Elizabeth was sputtering now.

He reached for the dryer. He was glad to see that Elizabeth had unplugged it already. “Huh. Was it an old dryer?”

“I just bought it three months ago. It always works fine ... I don’t know. Maybe I dropped it a while back ...” She shrugged her shoulders.

“You’ll be fine, hon. You look like you’re freaking out. Don’t freak out. They’ll love you. So it’s your first workshop. The run-throughs you showed me last night were great! You have all your visual aids, your notes ... Don’t worry.” He gave her a hug.

“Yeah, you’re right—first-time jitters ... Thanks.”

He smiled and walked out of the bathroom so she could finish. Her next thoughts did calm her. He was being supportive. He cared. He loved her.

“Thank you, heavenly Father. I am grateful that you have reconciled us and restored our marriage,” she said aloud.

She took one last look in the mirror, winked, and headed out the door. Outside, as she approached her car, the alarm went off. Elizabeth kept hitting the button on her key fob, but the alarm wouldn’t go off. She put the key in the door and opened the door, but the alarm still kept blaring.

What is going on here?

After a few more attempts at the key fob, the alarm finally went off.

That was totally weird, she thought.

Emily and Elizabeth had a very successful day. There were about forty people at the workshop. Emily and Elizabeth each spoke about energy healing and angels. Emily gave a few readings and then asked Elizabeth to step in. It was the first time Elizabeth had sat in a group this size and given readings. She overcame her fear almost immediately. Her face didn’t even turn red.

Baby steps out of the spiritual closet. It was a glorious day.

Elizabeth even made a few dollars in the process. She would donate those to the sisters at her alma mater.

Just before heading home, Elizabeth pulled into the parking lot at Greenwals Drugstore. She needed more vitamins and some shaving cream. As she crossed the

threshold of the store, the security alarms went off—loudly. The sales clerk looked up from the cash register, as did the huge line of customers waiting to check out. Elizabeth’s face went red as she shrugged her shoulders. The cashier waved her through.

That was weird, Elizabeth thought. Then, as she reached for the vitamin C, it dawned on her. She’d blown up her hair dryer, activated her car alarm, and now triggered the security alarms ... *Oh my*. She smiled at the memory of Emily’s story about turning on the windshield wipers in her car without the key in the ignition. What a pair.

She made her purchases and walked out the door. No security alarms went off this time.

Elizabeth always took notes after unusual healings or clearings. After a few months of being business partners with Emily, she looked back through her notebooks at the unusual cases.

Clearing of a new client’s classrooms at a school in Redwood City: Lots of negative activity. Negative energy stagnating in corners of both classrooms. Was able to detect a great deal of trauma in the large closet. Client confirmed the trauma. Years before her time there, a teacher had allegedly brought her students in there to “reprimand” them—physical abuse. Client had heard that this previous teacher had since passed away. Cleared and healed all areas.

Healing and clearing of house in San Francisco for family of five: Cleared house. Detected yelling areas in kitchen. Parents would lean against counters and scream at each other or their kids. Female spirit in son's closet. At night she would appear to son. She was the previous owner and did not want to leave. Not menacing but tried to reach out to the child. Son never mentioned this to parents until that day. Gave excellent reading to other son. Revealed his enrollment in military school and fear of guns. He was being pressured by parents to attend military school; wanted to be a veterinarian.

Clearing of private home in Pacifica: Repeat client was moving into new home and requested it be cleared. One of oldest homes in this area. Huge amounts of harsh energy downstairs in rumpus room. At one time, the house had been a small neighborhood bar with a brothel upstairs. Felt as though an accidental murder had taken place—two drunken men fighting over a woman from the brothel. A portion of the building had burned down, except for the remaining basement, the rumpus room. Upper part of house was rebuilt in the 1960s. Client confirmed nearly all information but could not verify the murder. She said she would

investigate in town records about the murder and get back to me. Later, confirmation of murder by client.

Healing of six-year-old girl: Previous client asked for a healing of her six-year-old daughter. Claimed they had taken her to various doctors, to no avail, for her volatile and sometimes withdrawn behavior. Determined that the girl had a twin sister who had died at birth and was now continuously contacting her sibling. The sister had started off coming in dreams a couple of years before and now was revealing her spirit to her sister. Distraught, the girl did not want to tell anyone what she was seeing. Healing and etheric-cord cutting.

Clearing of house in San Mateo: Client asked for clearing of home from negative energy she felt throughout the house. Client also said the previous owner's spirit had been interacting with her for years. Spirit had committed suicide in house, unbeknownst to new owner. Also determined that a relative was temporarily staying in the house. As a police officer, he was bringing in negative elements from his work. Cleared the house and cleared the spirit of the previous owner as well.

Elizabeth put the notebook down.

It was the evening before her forty-sixth birthday. She was excited about the weekend trip Jack had surprised her with. They were going to be staying at the little beach town of Carmel, which had been one of their favorite places since before they'd been married. They liked to take walks on the beach, watch the sunset, and sit on the white sand with glasses of wine. They always savored the fabulous food in intimate little restaurants and the exceptional shopping. Elizabeth had always hoped they would buy a beach house there one day. One could dream.

Elizabeth was finishing up the last of her to-do list, cleaning and putting things away. She placed a few coins into her coin sorter, a little machine she had bought for all the coins from the washers and dryers at the apartment buildings. Not paying close attention, Elizabeth accidentally overloaded it. She removed all the excess coins and tried turning it on again several times, to no avail. It just wouldn't work. Maybe the batteries were dead? Not wanting to bother with it, she left it.

She started packing for the trip. She had her outfits laid out on the bed already, and as she started placing them into her suitcase, the machine went on! Startled, she walked over to her desk and turned it off. Huh.

She noticed the roll of pennies was full, so she took it out, planning to secure the paper end. Just then, she noticed a really dark penny on the top. Curious, she plucked it out of the wrapper and grabbed a magnifying glass to see the date—1962. *Oh my God.* That was the year she was born! She laughed and laughed and laughed.

Someone just gave me a birthday present, she thought. Dad? ... Daddy? ... Is that you?

Jack was placing the last of the small suitcases in the back of the car as Elizabeth walked up to him with a garment bag. “Can you fit this last one in?” she asked.

“Anything for the birthday girl ... You ready to go? We should get on the road.”

“Yep, all ready.”

Jack noticed the mailman a few houses up the street and said, “I’m gonna wait for Todd. I’m waiting for a check. Okay?”

“Sure, no problem ... I’m already in vacation mode.” She smiled.

Jack walked down to meet Todd at his mail truck. They exchanged a few words, and then Jack came back the car and handed their stack of mail over to Elizabeth.

“Great, thanks, just what I needed—a few bills to look at while we head off on vacation ...” She smirked at her husband.

“Any checks?”

Elizabeth looked through the stack—a birthday card from her mom, one from her aunt, but nothing for Jack. One letter caught her eye. It was addressed to her in her own handwriting! It was from the Gilded Door. She had totally forgotten about it.

“What’s that? Looks like your writing ...” Jack said as they drove down the street.

“Yeah, it is. It’s a letter that I wrote to myself from the Gilded Door. It was an exercise for all the guests. They said they’d mail the letters six months after our stay. A tradition of some sort.”

Jack nodded and focused on the road.

Elizabeth was dying to read the letter, but Jack was talking about some problem with work and wanted to pick her brain about it. She listened and added a few ideas here and there.

They were on Highway One now; they were taking the coast all the way down. It was such a beautiful drive. The sun was out, and the sky was a pretty light blue. There were hardly any cars on the road. It was just the two of them, relaxed, happy, and friends again.

Jack smiled. He enjoyed how easy it was to be around each other now. It felt good to be friends and lovers again.

All checked into the hotel, Jack and Elizabeth decided to walk to the beach, which was just a couple of blocks away. Hand in hand, they walked down the slight decline on the sidewalk, talking about what they wanted to do over the weekend and what restaurants they wanted to go to, old favorites or new ones.

All the while, in the forefront of Elizabeth's mind was the letter. She *had* to read it and soon.

Spreading out the beach towels Elizabeth had brought from home, they settled in on the white sand. The view was breathtaking. To their right were views of the magnificent, stately homes of Pebble Beach. The world-renowned golf course was spectacular with its manicured greens upon the bluff. The very powerful and wealthy were the select few to own homes such as these on Seventeen-Mile Drive. To the left, the shoreline snaked its way past

the old mission, and beyond that Elizabeth could make out the Point Lobos Reserve Park.

If ever there was a place Elizabeth could call heaven, it was here. She and Jack just leaning against each other, holding hands, and people-watching was everything to her.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Jack asked.

“I’d love one, but we didn’t bring any with us.”

“I was thinking I could go back to the hotel and get that bottle the hotel left for us in our room. I don’t mind; it’s a short walk.”

“Mr. Warren, are you being an incredible, gallant husband?”

“Of course. For you, anything ...” He smiled his sexy little smile.

“Then I accept! I shall save your spot, so no other gallant gentleman takes it.” She chuckled.

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes, birthday girl.”

She nodded, reached up to grasp his shirt, and pulled him down for a kiss.

As he made his way up the sandy hill, she watched the fading sun on his back. She knew what he was doing: giving her the time and privacy she needed to read her letter. She watched him go and said a silent prayer of thanks for finding love with him, again. They’d made it through to the other side.

She reached into her purse and pulled the letter out. Looking around briefly, she was pleased to see not too many people around. She took a deep breath and opened the envelope with the Gilded Door emblem. She quickly glanced at the date and then read on.

Dearest Elizabeth,

Tonight I am sitting in my room, at the table near the doors, listening to the trickle of water, the crickets, the frogs, and the tinkling of the piano gently playing in the background off the radio. You, my dear, have been blessed; you know this. Always remember the things you have promised yourself you will let go of (concern over your weight, self-deprecating for others, worrying about what people think of you) and the things you've promised to embrace (loving not fighting, watching your warrior). And we always keep our promises.

As I emerged from the labyrinth this last night, I was filled with joy, relief, peace, serenity, and purpose. This week of unleashed self-discovery (and pampering) has led me to a very yummy place, a place of peace and wisdom. Some things that were taught here I already knew intuitively, and some I've been learning since I met Emily. But I've learned many, many new concepts as well.

Beloved, let go of those things that trap you and capture you in pain and fear and frustration. Let them go like the ashes of the paper you burned tonight. Remember that feeling of letting go, of release.

Tame the warrior, and encourage the beauty within so that it is reflected upon your body and in your face and projected from your eyes.

Live, my dear, in only this moment—not later, not tomorrow, but *right now*. Don't burden yourself (or your spirit) with anything other than this moment.

I have learned so many wonderful things about myself, my life, and my place in the world.

Pull your spirit in when you are noticing someone trying to stomp all over it. Don't let them stomp all over you, but do so in a peaceful, loving way.

Start loving yourself again! Be the woman you truly are. You know the woman I mean, the one with the great smile and the glow from her eyes because she is happy! Just do it, Elizabeth: be who you are. Be who *you* want to be, not what mold others try to cram you into. Care for yourself, and love yourself. You deserve all that God offers. We all do!

Hopefully, life will be long for you! Use these gifts you've been given. Try to feel right now, this very second, how you felt when you wrote this.

Now, go out into the world, and show 'em your stuff!

Beloved, there is only one you. Enjoy
her; love her. This life is a gift from God.
Be well.

Love from,
Elizabeth

PS. Remember this story ...

A samurai warrior goes to an old woman
to find out the meaning of heaven and hell.
She says she will not tell him, because he
is so demanding and aggressive. He grabs
the hilt of his sword and threatens her. She
replies, "That is hell" (aggression, quick to
temper, anger).

He then understands, drops his sword,
and breaks down and sobs. The old woman,
watching him cry, says, "That, my friend, is
heaven."

Elizabeth looked up from the letter, out toward the sea.
She felt the gentle warmth of the fading sun on her face.
Closing her eyes, she knew she had finally crossed the
last threshold.

~The End~

